

APPARENTLY, DISILLUSIONED ADVENTURERS WILL SAVE THE WORLD

The Lovely Paladin



2

Shinta Fuji

Illustrated by Susumu Kuroi



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**"BACK UP IF YOU DON'T WANT
TO CATCH A COLD."**

A white knight appeared where Nick and Tiana had been standing, surprising everyone. It wasn't the sudden appearance that was astonishing—it was the knight's very presence.

They had long golden hair that was both regal and beautiful. Their mystical figure was feminine yet lean and toned. A gap between the hem of their tunic and their boots revealed thin black fabric that made their thighs look like those of a supple panther.

Their pure white armor seemed like it had come out of a myth or a legend. The sword was a magical sight as well—the blade was a beam of blue light that extended from the guard in the shape of a rapier.

The white knight's face left the deepest impression of all. It was dignified and sharp and seemed to lie between genders. Everyone was taken by its beauty.



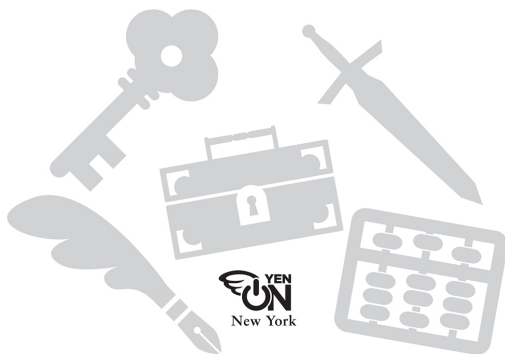
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Apparently, Disillusioned Adventurers Will Save the World: The
Lovely Paladin, Vol. 2
Shinta Fuji

Cover art by *Susumu Kuroi*
Translation by *Luke Hutton*

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NINGENFUSHIN NO BOKENSHATACHI GA SEKAI WO SUKUYODESU
Vol. 2 ~URUWASHI NO PALADIN HEN~

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First published in Japan in 2020 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION,
Tokyo

English translation rights arranged with KADOKAWA CORPORATION,
Tokyo through TUTTLE-MORI AGENCY, INC., Tokyo.

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Yen On
150 West 30th Street, 19th Floor
New York, NY 10001

Visit us at yenpress.com
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First Yen On Edition: February 2023

Edited by Yen On Editorial: Shella Wu, Anna Powers

Designed by Yen Press Design: Andy Swist

Yen On is an imprint of Yen Press, LLC.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Fuji, Shinta, author. | Kuroi, Susumu, illustrator. | Hutton, Luke, translator.

Title: Apparently, disillusioned adventurers will save the world / Shinta Fuji ; illustration by Susumu Kuroi ; translation by Luke Hutton.

Other titles: Ningen fushin no bōkensha-tachi ga sekai o sukuu yō desu. English

Description: First Yen On edition. | New York, NY : Yen On, 2022- |

Identifiers: LCCN 2022020938 | ISBN 9781975349981 (v. 1 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975351861 (v. 2 ; trade paperback)

Subjects: CYAC: Fantasy. | Adventure and adventurers—Fiction. | Politics, Practical—Fiction. | LCGFT: Action and adventure fiction. | Fantasy fiction. | Light novels.

Classification: LCC PZ7.1.F8 Ap 2022 | DDC [Fic]—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022020938>

ISBNs: 978-1-9753-5186-1 (paperback) 978-1-9753-5187-8 (ebook)

E3-20230105-JV-NF-ORI

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Tiana's Trip



I lost it all. My fiancé, my family, my social status, and even my future.

That reality had me on the brink of despair, but at the same time, I felt a slight amount of pleasure from it. It was as if a small part of me had always hoped I would be freed in this way. I no longer had to act like a lady. I didn't have to get up early to go to school and spend my precious teenage years stuck in gloomy laboratories.

I finished gathering the personal belongings that I had stored in the school laboratory and clapped my hands. This was farewell to this dusty room full of books. That was an act of defiance, of course. The levelheaded part of me understood that I would need some boldness and even a little recklessness in order to survive.

"Tiana...you are no longer a student at this school," said a man, with grief and disappointment in his voice.

"I know," I replied frankly.

"Even so, you are still a mage."

I almost smiled at the sincerity of his words. A mage was a person who used magic for their job. They could be a businessperson, a soldier in the Magic Division of the country's army, or a teacher or researcher working at a school. If a person without a career called themselves a mage, they would be laughed at and ridiculed.

Despite that, the man before me—my instructor—hated the belief that magic should be used only to make a living. He always said mages should be free. According to him, mages and magic had existed long before countries and societies were formed. That meant even without the trappings of society, they would still be around. It was the individual who labeled themselves a mage and decided who exactly they wanted to be. He repeated this consistently in his lectures and in

conversations.

I wasn't in a place to find those words very encouraging at the moment. After all, I'd come to the lab only to collect my things. I hadn't expected him to still be at school, and I had no intention of exchanging a proper good-bye.

"...Instructor, have you forgotten? My goal was never to be a mage. It was to be a mage's wife," I said.

"No, I have not. But that is an empty position for one with true ambition for magic. The freedom in your heart is the one thing that others cannot take from you."

"...What good is freedom going to do me now? It's over for me. You're not any better off—you won't be able to become a sage now."

I was ruined and stripped of my place in the world after falling into that trap. I was going to be the first girl ever to graduate at the top of her class at my aristocratic school, but I'd been expelled because of a groundless rumor saying I seduced my teachers. The source of the rumor was none other than my fiancé and the girl he cheated on me with. This caused a scandal that my renowned noble family wanted no part of, and they banished me.

The teachers who I had supposedly seduced—including the man before me—were forced to quit their jobs. My instructor would likely never achieve the title of "sage" now. Neither of us was in a position to pursue our dreams. We would both need to focus entirely on day-to-day survival. He could do nothing to save me from this dilemma, and I was powerless to help him as well.

We had both been utterly defeated—that was what freedom meant. We were free because nobody wanted us around anymore.

"...Yes, some of our dreams may no longer be achievable. But honestly, I am relieved for you in some respects. Your fiancé...Alex, was it? I never thought that licentious boy was good for you," my instructor said.

"E-excuse me?!" I exclaimed, shocked.

I couldn't deny that Alex wasn't the best behaved. It was true that he frequented the amusement quarter, and while I wanted to say he turned on me only because he was deceived by a girl, that argument held little weight. He may have been a playboy, but he wasn't stupid. I believed his actions were calculated and intentional, but it was still difficult for me to accept.

While there was a certain pleasure at having lost everything in my life, I still held a tiny sliver, a few salt grains, of hope—that Alex would realize what a fool he had been and ask to be with me again. I held on to the fantasy that the days of waking up early in my family's estate and getting dressed to go to school would return. Typical of a person hitting rock bottom, I was split between two extremes: feeling

like I might as well do whatever I wanted now that I had nothing, and the delusional desire for everything to go back to the way it was.

"My apologies. That was rude of me. Please forget I said anything. Regardless..." My instructor cleared his throat awkwardly. "Knowledge of who you are—what you have learned, and what you can do—is an asset that no one can take from you. Please do not believe that everything you have cultivated this far is worthless because of one setback... If this is too hard for you to bear, however, forgetting it all is an option as well."

"...Yes, I suppose you're right. It would be silly not to use everything I have at my disposal," I responded, examining the shelves in the room. I didn't see much that I could bring with me. It would be pointless to take any utensils unless they had value as pieces of art. I couldn't justify taking tobacco, either. There were notes keeping track of everything in the lab, limiting what I could steal.

That left consumable magic items and talismans. They were small and wouldn't take up too much space. The items had been purchased using the school budget, but I pilfered a few. No one would miss them if I lied and said they were used for research purposes, I figured.

"Everything at your disposal... In that case, I will give you this," my instructor said, handing me something.

"Is this your igniter?"

"You've always wanted one, right?"

"Yes, but..."

An igniter was a magic item that could cast the spell *Ignite*. It looked like a smooth metal stick. Injecting a small amount of mana into it generated a flame on one end that could be used to light a cigarette or start a fire, but that was all they were normally used for.

My instructor's igniter, however, was unique. He had made special modifications so that it could cast a spell from each of the four magic elements—earth, water, fire, and wind. They were all weak spells that could not be used to hurt anyone, but the changes made the igniter a nice multipurpose tool.

"Think of it as a farewell gift," he urged.

"...Thank you very much," I replied, barely able to force out my thanks. I was unable to manage an apology for causing him to lose his job. He didn't apologize to me, either.

I turned around, opened the door, and took my first step into the cruel world I now had to face.

"...Geez, I'm such a mess."

I took one step before I realized I was dreaming about the past and woke up. I heard sparrows singing outside and saw sunlight peeking through the curtains. This was neither school nor my family's

estate—it was the apartment I was renting with the money I earned as an adventurer.

What a terrible dream. I had just de-stressed at the dragon-racing track after a big payday, too. I did not need to be reminded of all that past baggage. The scene in the dream took place just before I left the capital...and of all moments to relive, it was when I said farewell to my instructor.

I would have rather seen Alex or Lene—the girl who stole Alex from me—both of whom I hated with all my heart. I had enough lingering affection to occasionally dream of getting back together right after he broke off our engagement, but now I wanted to make that bastard pay for what he'd done to me.

Thinking about my instructor was much more painful. It reminded me of how pathetic and narrow-minded I was. At the time, I was angry with him and my other teachers for not knowing how to handle the scandal and failing to protect me. I behaved like a spoiled child. The memory made me aware of my immaturity.

I realized now that, instead of resenting them, I should have apologized to them. I had not abandoned magic; it was only because of the effort I put into my studies as a student that I was able to make it to Teran, the Labyrinth City, alone and earn a living. I had always benefitted from my skill as a mage, in the past and now. I would not have been enjoying my days in Labyrinth City if not for everything my instructor had done for me.

“...Actually, it isn't just my status as a mage I have to be thankful for.”

I was currently in an adventurer's party called the Survivors. I was supporting myself as both a mage and an adventurer. I took on this position after a certain young man had offered to help me. How would my life have turned out without those two pillars? I likely would have been overwhelmed by my distrust toward others and become homeless, or worse. I didn't even want to think about what would have happened after that.

“All right, guess I'll go out.”

I had no idea if I would ever meet my instructor again. I wanted to, of course. But I was sure he was doing fine—it was hard to imagine someone as capable as him ending up in as precarious a situation as me. That said, misfortune could strike at any moment in life. Knowing that, I needed to continue to apply myself as an adventurer.

I had to admit the man who suggested we form a party was impressive. He was surprisingly intelligent and caring for a person who had worked as an adventurer his entire life. Even so, he was in an unstable position as well. He was also a hopeless idol fan. I didn't feel obligated to return his favor necessarily, but I thought I should

support him.

We were holding a meeting at the Adventurers Guild today, so I needed to pull myself together. I got out of bed, washed my face, and got dressed. I packed some daily necessities into my pouch, along with my pipe and igniter, and wrapped it around my waist. Finally, I slipped my arms through my trusty robe, donned my hat, and did a spin in front of my mirror.

“Perfect.”

During my journey from the capital to Labyrinth City, I’d come to think the robe suited me quite well. It was ironic—now that I was in a position in which no one would ever recognize me as a mage, the attire looked better on me than ever. At least no one in the guild looked down on me for not being a full-fledged mage. If anything, I felt like they all thought highly of me.

“Time to go to work.”

In real life this time, I stepped out into the world.

Bond's First Mission



Nick—a slender man wearing green leather armor—began to blow on his numb hands to warm them up.

“Achoo.”

The attempt turned into a sneeze. He brushed ice from his black hair and tried to hold his trembling body steady. He remained vigilant of his surroundings all the while, not letting the cold distract him. Despite his young age, he tended to act like a stern veteran.

“It’s gotten kinda cold...”

Nick was freezing—the cave he was in was caked almost entirely in ice. It covered the walls and ceiling, and giant icicles resembling stalactites hung from above to create an almost mystical atmosphere, as if he were walking through a hollow crystal.

The cave was the labyrinth known as the Rakshasa Ice Cavern. The temperature was always below zero, regardless of the season, which meant the ice stuck to your skin if contact was made. That wasn’t all—there were also monsters that had adapted to the extreme cold. Fortunately, humans could adapt to the environment as well by using magic. Nick and his party had no trouble doing so, enabling them to spend time in the cavern making good money.

“Are you okay?” a female dragonian asked Nick.

She had two horns and flaming red hair. Her arms were covered in red scales that reminded one of a powerful dragon. She was tall and muscular, and the giant sword she wielded was as tall as her. She appeared strong and beautiful, but there was a lack of sophistication in her bearing and manner of speech.

“Yeah, I’m just a little cold. How about you?” Nick asked.

“I’m fine,” Karan replied before gently wiping snow out of Nick’s hair.

“Hey, I said I’m all right.”

“But it would be cold if it touches your neck.”

“I can handle it myself. Anyway, let’s finish up here so we can get some dinner.”

“Okay!”

Karan beamed. Visiting different restaurants was her hobby and the reason she worked as an adventurer. It wasn’t uncommon for gluttonous people or gourmands to spend a lot of money on their meals, but Karan took it to an extreme, wasting nearly everything she earned on food.

“Oh, Nick. Did Insulation wear off by any chance?” asked a tall, priestly man in a cassock.

“I think so. I’m freezing my ass off here.”

“Allow me to cast it again. I will do the same for everyone else, just to be safe.”

“Thanks, Zem.”

The priestly man—Zem—opened his holy book and chanted a spell. A warm light enveloped the five of them.

“Phew... That feels so much better,” Nick said with relief.

Insulation was a spell that prevented a person’s body temperature from rising or falling, thereby mitigating the effects of extreme cold or heat. It wasn’t the flashiest spell, but it was very useful for long journeys or trips into places like this ice cavern, thus enabling Nick and the others to adventure safely through this labyrinth.

It wasn’t only through his magic that Zem supported the other four—his stately voice, neat chestnut hair, and tall stature gave him a relaxing presence.

“I bet this spell makes you popular with the ladies,” Nick teased.

“Ha-ha, a spell cannot rival the warmth of human skin,” Zem responded.

Despite his appearance, Zem was not a priest. He was a peculiar man full of surprising contradictions. His hobby consisted of visiting the red-light district in Labyrinth City. He frequented hostess clubs and enjoyed himself late into the night.

“I’m amazed you can say that with a straight face... Anyone other than you would probably get punched,” said a girl with blond hair.

“It’s not like your lifestyle is above reproach, either, Tiana,” Nick ribbed.

“I’m well aware.”

Tiana looked like the prototypical mage in her stylish purple robe. Her mystical appearance matched the quiet beauty of the cave perfectly, but that was ruined the moment she opened her mouth. She was the moneymaker in the party, using her magic to kill the most monsters out of any of them, yet she also happened to be the most

wasteful spender.

“The Dragon God Cup is starting soon. I need to save up,” Tiana said.

“What is the Dragon God Cup?” Karan asked.

Tiana answered with a smile. “It’s a race that’s only open to the dragons with the best performance over the previous year. The winner is considered to be the fastest dragon in Labyrinth City.”

The primary reason Tiana spent so much money was because of gambling. She was particularly obsessed with dragon racing, and she won and lost more money than one could ever guess from her innocent appearance.

“Didn’t you only start betting on dragon races a few months ago?” Nick asked, exasperated. But Tiana was not discouraged.

“You’re one to talk. You hadn’t even heard of idols until recently, and now you’re as big a fan as they come. What concert are you going to next?” she retorted.

“There’s an outdoor one this weekend. My favorite isn’t gonna be there, but there are some new idols I wanna check out. Aggie’s solo concert is next month, though. That’s the one that really matters.”

Just like the other four, Nick had a bad and embarrassing habit—he was an idol groupie.

“Good heavens, all you children do is waste time on your silly hobbies. We’re nearing the depths of the cavern, so prepare yourselves,” said a young boy with silver hair, shrugging in disbelief. He wore a longsword on his back despite his short stature, and his delicate facial features gave him an androgynous beauty.

“You’re just as wasteful with your allowance, Bond,” Nick countered.

“I am studying modern society as an investment for my future. I am not carelessly spending my money,” Bond argued, puffing out his chest proudly.

“Interesting. What have you bought?” Tiana asked, but Nick answered in his place.

“Books. He buys anything in print, from young adult fiction to newspapers.”

“Books enrich the mind. They are essential to a fulfilling human life.”

“You’re a sword, not a human.”

“I am both!” Bond exclaimed angrily in response to Nick.

What Bond said was true. He had assumed human form, but in reality, he was a holy sword known as the Sword of Bonds, an ancient relic the Survivors discovered in a labyrinth. He disguised himself as an ordinary adventurer because he did not want to be handed to the Adventurers Guild and displayed as a decoration.

“Bibliophiles do have a habit of buying a bunch of books they’ll never read and cluttering their room with them...,” Tiana muttered as if from personal experience, and Bond averted his eyes.

Tiana was right on the money—Nick’s room at the inn was already getting buried in Bond’s things, and his own growing collection of idol merchandise was not helping the situation. He was paying for the room at a daily rate, so this was becoming a serious problem.

“...Nick. Would it not be better for us to move into a slightly larger room? Or perhaps an apartment?” Bond asked.

“I need to save money, and given my lack of status, I’d need a guarantor to rent an apartment. You’ll need to wait a little longer,” Nick answered.

“The world is cruel...” Bond sighed.

“That’s why we have to work. We need to kill the boss and save money so we can—”

“Go spend more time on your hobbies?” Bond interrupted.

Nick nearly said, “You know it,” but stopped himself. The Survivors continued on to the depths of the labyrinth with wide smiles on their faces.

“Hmm, so this is the rakshasa.”

“Be careful, okay?”

Hidden from view, the Survivors were surveying the boss of this labyrinth. They had killed the rakshasa many times already, but it was a new one every time. Monsters were born as new individuals when the miasma in the labyrinths grew thick. This rakshasa instinctively protected the depths of the ice cavern without memory of dying. It was the perfect opportunity to test the strength of their new party member.

“Okay! Watch and behold my prowess with the blade!” Bond shouted.

“Stop, you moron! Why shout like that when you can just use Telepathy?!” Nick hissed.

“Grrrrrr!” Bond ignored him and leaped out at the monster with no hesitation. “Shaaaaa!”

The rakshasa’s sharp claws took a swipe at Bond, but Bond gracefully blocked the attack like it was second nature. He was holding a perfectly ordinary sword—despite his identity as a holy sword, he couldn’t exactly wield himself while in human form. Even so, he stopped the rakshasa’s claws perfectly with the tip of his blade.

“Such brute force cannot best me.”

“Gwah...?”

Bond was relying on skill rather than strength. The sight of a

young boy possessing the aura of a veteran swordsman filled the monster with fear.

“GWOOOOOH!”

The rakshasa leaped backward and focused mana into its hands. It was preparing to use a spell called Ice Bullet, which was similar to Tiana’s Icicle Dance but fired one large block of ice instead of multiple shards.

“Hrah!”

Bond knocked the block of ice off course with a swing of his blade.

“GWAH?!”

The rakshasa grew flustered after seeing the ace up its sleeve dealt with so easily. Bond took advantage of its hesitation.

“Yah!”

In an instant, Bond had jumped between its arms and swung his sword at its neck. The bluntness of his swing gave the rakshasa time to defend itself, and steel and claws clashed.



“Ngh...gwaaah...?”

“Parallel.”

Bond’s win was set in stone the moment they entered that deadlock. The rakshasa thought it had successfully held off the small swordsman, but didn’t notice that Bond had lured it into a defensive position. A second Bond appeared out of nowhere, circled around the monster, and quickly ended its life with a downward stroke.

“GWAAAAAAAAA?! ”

The giant rakshasa screamed as it died.

“Okay... How was that?” Bond asked.

“That’s plain unfair...,” Nick muttered in disbelief. They had just witnessed the true value of Parallel. The spell created a replica of the Sword of Bonds’s wielder, and it could produce more than one.

“I believe I can currently produce five bodies. Not bad,” Bond proclaimed.

“I do feel kinda tired, though,” Nick said.

“That is to be expected. I am borrowing your stamina and mana, after all... *Delete*.” The duplicate of Bond that had finished off the boss vanished.

“Amazing... That’s just like Solo Diner Fifs,” Karan commented.

“Oh yeah, I’ve heard a rumor that he can use Doppelgänger,” Nick responded.

Solo Diner Fifs was one of the few S-rank adventurers active in Labyrinth City. He was a do-it-all fighter who could wield a sword and use magic, but he was most famous for his killer technique—Doppelgänger. It was an incredible skill that allowed him to create duplicates of himself, all capable of handling a sword or using magic to create a perfectly balanced party alone.

He was Karan’s role model. The way he remained proudly independent as an S-rank adventurer and ate alone at restaurants without a care for what others thought left a deep impression on her.

“Doppelgänger, huh... This man must be quite skilled,” Bond said.

“Why do you say that? Is it better than Parallel?” Nick asked.

“It depends on the situation. Doppelgänger differs from Parallel in that it summons multiple ‘egos’ that exist inside you and manifests them into the physical world. It is much more practical, mainly because it consumes less mana and can be maintained for a longer period of time. I remember hearing of some who could operate with multiple copies of themselves for hours on end,” Bond explained.

“That’s nuts... I wonder how long Fifs can use it. Do you know, Karan?” Nick asked.

“I think for over half a day. Just recently he split into five people so he could order five cheesecakes that were supposed to be limited to

one per customer. The staff got really mad at him,” she answered.

“Well, that sure demystifies the man... You’d think an S-rank adventurer would be a little more concerned with their image,” Nick said with a frown.

Karan tilted her head. “You think so? Everyone found it hilarious. He is famous for his love of food.”

“He sounds like a surprisingly interesting guy.”

“Anyhow, I may not be able to use Doppelgänger, but I’m still quite useful, no?” Bond bragged.

“Hell yeah, you are. Even without Parallel, your skill with the sword is unbelievable. You looked like a pro. Where did you learn to fight like that?” Nick asked.

“I was installed with fundamental sword skills during my development stage.”

“In stall? What does that mean?” Nick looked at Tiana and Zem, but they shook their heads to show they didn’t know what it meant, either.

“Essentially, I was gifted with the talent of an experienced swordsman.”

“That’s totally unfair! You didn’t have to work for anything!”

“No, it is not! Your rudeness knows no bounds,” Bond fumed, raising his hands in protest.

Nick shrugged. “Calm down; it was a joke. Anyway, you’re definitely gonna be a big help to us. Having you along with Karan and me in the vanguard should help us have fewer accidents. And us being stronger mean the rear guard won’t have to cast as many spells. This really helps our overall balance as a party.”

“Does that mean we’ll be able to take on more advanced labyrinths?” Tiana asked hopefully.

Nick smiled and nodded. “Yeah, that’ll be no problem.”

“Hmm-hmm, and don’t forget my ultimate technique.” Bond laughed proudly.

Nick’s expression grew serious. “We shouldn’t rely on Union.”

“Wh-why not?!”

“One use of it wipes me out. We have to be careful. Also...”

“Wh-what?”

“Our success rate is really low! It’s awkward when Union fails!”

The Survivors had already tested the spell several times, with little success. Despite Nick’s Union with Karan in the Labyrinth of Bonds, they had succeeded in only a third of the attempts since then. He had yet to achieve Union with Tiana or Zem.

“Th-that may be so, but you just need a little practice! I guarantee you can do it!”

“Eh, if you say so. It’ll be nice to have as a last resort, at least.”

"It will indeed!"

"With you on board, achieving an advanced adventurer rank doesn't feel like a distant dream anymore. Thanks, Bond."

"H-huh? You should be nice like this more often..." Bond blushed and looked away. Karan patted him on the back, and the others followed suit. "Say something! I don't know what this means!"

"It means we're counting on you," Nick answered.

When the Survivors returned to the Fishermen Adventurers Guild, the other adventurers teased them when they sold their materials. "Wow, another big haul!" said one; "You guys should go drink sometimes!" said another. Nick told them to mind their own business and do some work for once instead of lazing around like drunkards all the time, and the five of them finally slipped out of the crowded guild.

"All right, we're done for the day," Nick announced.

"A-are we already splitting up?!" Bond asked, shocked.

"Yep."

"I thought for sure we were going to find a restaurant and indulge ourselves with some delicious food... That is what all the other adventurers do, is it not?"

"They have nothing to do with us. One of our ironclad rules is that we don't interfere with each other's hobbies and private lives."

"S-sure, but...should we not have a little fun together?"

"Hmm..."

Nick didn't want to break their pact. That said, he had come to notice that the "don't interfere in each other's private lives" rule wasn't entirely possible to enforce. Although it wasn't rare for them to spend days at a time together during their adventures, there was still a line they had to respect.

"I am not saying we should spend all our time together. But I am not yet familiar with this land, and parting with a simple 'Have a nice day!' feels a bit lonely. It's not like we're working part-time at a McBurger's."

"There you go with that weird ancient language again. What the heck is a McBurger's?"

"Anyway! I am not saying we have to do it every time, but I think we should share an occasional celebratory feast. How can we call ourselves adventurers otherwise?"

"It's too early for most pubs to be open. We could go to a restaurant or a snack bar, I guess..."

"That sounds sufficient. None of us are heavy drinkers anyway... Right?" Bond asked, eyeing each of them.

"I do not enjoy alcohol as much as I enjoy being served with a woman on either side of me," Zem answered.

“Well, that’s very you... Do you want to go, Tiana?” Nick asked.

“I’ll go if there’s sweets or tobacco,” she answered.

“Like a restaurant is gonna serve tobacco... Wait, since when do you smoke?”

“I don’t smoke much in public. Are we doing this or not?”

“Hmm... Might as well.”

That was how the Survivors decided to have their first real celebration since the formation of their party.

Close to the Fishermen Adventurers Guild, Nick and the others walked down a street with many bars and restaurants. The foot traffic was sparse—the area came to life mainly after sunset, and the only people there now were adventurers who’d finished their work early and those who worked at night.

“Any place with a barker trying to attract customers sucks, so ignore those. None of them are out to rip you off, though, so you don’t have to worry about that,” Nick explained.

“Yeah,” agreed Karan.

“I am not a picky eater, so I am fine with anything. Oh, but I can’t do barley or millet porridge. I don’t want bread or rice, either. And no salty fish,” Bond said.

“You sure sound picky to me... Well, I’m sure there’ll be something you like at whatever restaurant we choose,” Nick responded. He pointed at one on a quiet part of the street. “How about this place?”

“Wow, it’s fancy,” Tiana said, sounding slightly surprised.

It was a brick building with warm candles flanking the entrance. A blackboard on the door displayed today’s menu, which was written in neat handwriting and accompanied with illustrations of the food.

“Yeah. That’s why...” Nick trailed off. That was why he’d often taken Claudine here on dates. It was a café called Fromage. “...Man, this place brings back bad memories.”

The face of Claudine, Nick’s ex-girlfriend, flashed through his mind. But she was never really his girlfriend; she was only using him for money. Thinking back on how much money he’d spent on that horrible woman made him so embarrassed, he wanted to die. The sight of any woman with soft, blond hair still set his teeth on edge.

“Is something the matter, Nick?” Zem asked with concern.

“No, it’s nothing...”

Bond ignored them both and walked toward the café. “I’m so hungry, I could eat a dragon. Let’s go inside.” He opened the door, causing a bell to ring gently.

“Welcome,” an employee said.

“Hello. We have five people,” Nick replied.

It looked like the lunch rush had just ended, and they were shown to a table without having to wait.

"We'll all start off with a drink... What do you guys want to eat?" Nick asked.

"I will have a sandwich combo. Are all the employees here men? I do not spy any women. How disappointing," Zem commented.

"Zem, can you put flirting out of your mind for two seconds?" Tiana sighed.

"I require omelet rice!" Bond exclaimed.

"I want fried hairtail with yuzu sauce," said Karan. "I'll have couscous for my side."

"Don't all speak at once. You're giving the waiter a hard time," said Nick. "Sorry for the racket. Are you all good with wine for your drink? I'm getting ice water." He repeated the orders to the waiter. "So Zem wants a sandwich, Bond wants omelet rice, and Karan wants...fried hairtail, right?"

"Yeah," Karan confirmed.

They didn't have to wait long for their food and wine to arrive. They must have entered the café at the perfect time.

"Good work today, everyone. Cheers."

""""""Cheers!""""""

Nick raised his glass languidly, and the rest followed his example. They chatted as they ate the delicious food.

"The race the other day was *insane*. It was going fine until the dragon in first place was hit with fire from behind. It got pissed, and turned around and retaliated. The racetrack was on fire in seconds," Tiana recounted excitedly.

"Does anyone ever die at these races, Tiana?" Nick inquired.

"Oh, Nick. You poor, innocent child. That's half the fun."

"Sorry, I don't see the appeal."

"I'm kidding. There's a barrier and a wall, so people don't die too often."

"But not never?"

They discussed Tiana's hobby...

"Citrine is the most popular idol right now. She can sing and dance, and her greatest appeal is her charisma as a speaker. As an Agate fan, she's good enough that it's kinda irritating. I hate to admit it, but I gotta give credit to Citrine's groupies for their discipline, too. Oh, and a guy I met recently named Willy taught me how to do the glow stick dances," Nick said.

"You become a totally different person when talking about idols," Tiana said.

"Your eyes are scarier than when you beat up that ogre," Karan commented.

"I suppose we are all the same in that respect," Zem added.

They discussed Nick's hobby...

"There's a new type of sandwich that's gotten really popular at stalls in parks recently. It contains fried octolegs, fried onions, lettuce, and a crazy amount of sauce and spices, but it's *so good*. An old woman who runs a stall by herself next to the entrance to the botanical garden makes the best one," Karan raved.

"Now *that's* something I wanna check out. I'm glad we have you around, Karan," Nick said.

"That's an impressive find," Tiana said.

"I did not know about that," Zem mused. "I will give it a try."

"R-really? Tee-hee..." Karan laughed.

They discussed Karan's hobby...

"As for me—," Zem began, but Nick interrupted him.

"Hey, Zem."

"Yes, Nick?"

"That's not the kinda thing you talk about with girls at the table."

"Ah, yes."

"You can tell me about it when we're alone."

"Oh, would you like to come with me tonight? The girls always ask me to bring someone from my party when I tell them about my adventures."

"Leave me out of your nightlife escapades, please."

"I suppose a hostess club could be overwhelming for a first-timer. A quiet snack bar might be better... Or maybe we should dive right into a club or show bar?"

"I have no idea what the difference between those is."

...And they passed on talking about Zem's hobby, but they still had great fun chatting about their respective interests. Nick occasionally sensed suspicious glances from the waitstaff, but he decided to ignore them. He was just happy to have this silly conversation with his companions to overwrite the painful memories he had of this place.

Life Improvements



Bond's first mission filled the Survivors with enthusiasm for the future, but it didn't take long for a problem to rear its head.

"Nick...", Tiana said, sitting down on Nick's bed and giving him the stink eye.

"What is it?" Nick responded defensively.

"I can't deny you have it together as an adventurer."

"Thank you...?" Tiana's critical expression made him unsure how to take that compliment.

"However."

"Y-yeah?"

"This room is cramped as hell."

"Ah..."

The problem was that they didn't have a suitable place to hold meetings. Because they were all staying in either rental apartments or inns, none of them had a residence the party could use as a base. This was an issue because they wanted a secluded location to check the money in the safe against the ledger. Having no other options, they decided to meet in Nick's inn room.

The inn was located in a post town called South Gate, which was in the southern part of Labyrinth City. The presence of many rough-mannered people like day laborers and adventurers meant the area couldn't exactly be called safe, but the lack of clear outlaws made it a favorite spot of many. It was the place to live if you were set on working hard and saving money in the city.

Nick certainly was serious about his job, but his spending had gotten out of hand over the last month. His room was positively drowning in idol merchandise and Bond's rapidly growing collection of books and periodicals. He had clearly made an attempt to keep it

clean—his coats were folded, the books were stacked neatly, and there was no trash on the floor—but that didn't do a lot of good when the room was still so cramped. They were all practically knocking knees.

"...I'd rather do this somewhere a little more spacious," Tiana griped.

"I would, too, but this is all I've got," Nick responded, averting his eyes.

"What do other adventurers do?"

"I assume most of them gather at their leader's house."

"Is that why you invited us here?"

"I guess. So welcome to my humble abode. You're gonna have to deal with it for now," Nick said, sarcastically spreading his arms wide to show off his tiny room.

"No need to be a jerk about it..."

"I wouldn't mind using your apartment again, Tiana."

"I-it's a mess right now... I'll get it in order by tomorrow. No, the day after tomorrow." This time it was Tiana's turn to avert her eyes.

"I'm joking. I don't want to keep imposing like that... I wish we could just rent a private room at the guild."

"Is that difficult?"

"We can't do it with our current rank. The guild'll grant us a bunch of new privileges once we reach D rank...but we'll have to manage using this space until then."

Zem gave a strained smile. "Well, there is no point in crying for the moon. We should use Nick's room for now and work together to find another solution."

"Yeah...", Nick agreed uneasily. "This inn is cheap. It only costs fifteen hundred dina a day to stay here. I'll look into getting an apartment like Tiana's once I save up a little more money."

"Holy...", Tiana gasped, clearly startled.

"What is it?" Nick asked defensively.

"I know the room is small, but...that's *shockingly* cheap."

"Having a small room does have its advantages. There are no fancy magic appliances, but the well water is free. How much do your places cost?" Nick looked at his companions.

Zem spoke up first. "My room is two thousand dina per day. Though I often spend the night at hostess clubs or love hotels."

"Th-that's crazy," Nick said.

"Can you afford to stay at those places?" Tiana asked.

Nick and Tiana both recoiled, but rather than taking offense, Zem responded with pride. "There's no hourly charge, and many establishments are lenient with regular customers. I even join the male employees for breakfast on occasion."

"H-huh..."

“However, it does get a little uncomfortable whenever they act in earnest and try to console me. They are always warning me that it is dangerous to continue this lifestyle for too long and asking me if I went through some rough experience that led me to it.”

“I have no idea what to say to that...,” Nick said. His astonishment had turned to respect, but before they could delve any deeper into that topic, he looked at the one remaining party member.

“Mine is five hundred dina a day,” Karan boasted.

““““Are you serious?!””””

Nick, Tiana, and Zem were gobsmacked. Five hundred dina was well below market value for an inn room.

“Th-there’s clearly something off there, Karan!” Nick shouted.

“It’s really cheap, though...,” Karan argued, confused by their reaction.

“No place should be *that* cheap! You can’t buy more than two cups of coffee with that kinda money... Where is it, by the way?”

“East Branch.”

“I see...” Nick grimaced.

“Where is East Branch?” Tiana asked.

“It’s near a stage station and the city wall that was built to keep out monsters. It’s a post town for people working in the area. Well, it was anyway.”

“What do you mean, ‘was’?”

“The jobs decreased once the wall was finished, and they disappeared completely once the stage station moved. It’s a slum now.”

“Ah, I figured Labyrinth City had places like that.” Tiana sighed.

“It’s packed with has-been adventurers and old men running from debt collectors, selling dodgy herbs, and smoking those dodgy herbs. There aren’t many thieves and criminals like there are in other slums, but it’s still dangerous,” Nick explained.

“Oh yeah, I saw an old man dancing naked outdoors the other day,” Karan said. The other three were stunned by how indifferent she sounded.

“You need to move immediately, you moron!” Nick yelled.

“Please tell me you’re joking. That’s no place for a young girl like you! You’d be better off getting an inn around here, at least!” Tiana chastised.

“It is not my place to comment on your life decisions, Karan, but I think you should place greater value on your safety...,” Zem advised.

Karan cowered in the face of their disapproval, yet she remained defensive. “B-but the price is good! And I’m stronger than those old men anyway!”

“That’s not the problem!” Nick shouted.

“W-we’re not supposed to interfere with each other’s private lives, remember?”

“That’s true, but we’re just concerned about your safety... Though clearly we don’t see eye to eye on this. Let’s decide by majority vote. All in favor of Karan moving to a better location, raise your hand,” Nick said.

“I’m in favor,” Tiana responded.

“As am I,” Zem said next.

“Th-that’s not fair!” Karan argued.

Bond shrugged as he watched the four of them yell at each other. “Must you always make such a racket? I am not satisfied with my living condition, either. Nick and I are staying in the same room, so if we split the rent between us, we would be spending less than one thousand dina each. Surely we can already afford to move,” he muttered, sounding annoyed.

“You’d have more space in this room if you just turned back into a sword,” Tiana said.

“Hey, that’s discrimination! Do not treat me as less than a person,” Bond replied, offended.

“All right, all right. Sorry.”

“You are forgiven.”

Bond nodded, apparently satisfied, and Nick raised his voice. “Anyway! Will you please move, Karan?”

“But...,” Karan protested.

“We’ve entrusted the safe to you. Are you giving any thought to its security?”

“I sleep with it in my arms.”

“...Just like a dragon guarding a treasure hoard,” Nick muttered.

“They say to ‘never touch a dragon’s treasure,’” Zem mumbled.

Wild dragons had a tendency to collect shiny objects like gold and jewels and store them in their nest. Dragons were not monsters and their nests were not labyrinths, so entering them was not recommended. There were even penalties for doing so. Despite that, it wasn’t rare for foolish adventurers to slip into a dragon’s den looking for treasure and get eaten. The danger had given birth to a cautionary saying: “Never touch a dragon’s treasure.”

“That’s well and good, but the only thing you’re protecting that way is the safe. What about your own money and belongings? Don’t you want to be sure you can store them safely?” Nick asked.

“Uh...” Karan had no argument. She finally gave in.

The reason Karan was so reluctant to give up her cheap inn was because she wanted to save money to buy nice clothes that would allow her to enter restaurants with a dress code. Or rather, that was

what she wanted them to believe; the real reason was so she could spend as much as possible satisfying her rather unladylike appetite. But when Nick and the others insisted that any nice clothes she bought would get stolen anyway, and if even they didn't, they would get eaten by bugs, she was finally convinced into relocating. Nick, Tiana, and Zem rushed through counting their inventory of consumables and checking the ledger so they could finish before Karan changed her mind and, afterward, helped with her move that day.

"Haah... Haah... It is time we take our leave," Zem panted.

"I'm pooped... Do your best to stay away from dangerous areas, okay, Karan?" Tiana cautioned.

They were both exhausted from a day of working as Karan's express movers, and they left before they even had time to catch their breath. They'd moved Karan into the same inn where Nick was staying. That seemed the easiest thing to do, and Karan had no objections.

"Those two worry too much." Karan puffed out her cheeks in displeasure.

"Don't say that. They just helped you out. Anyway, don't go back to East Branch," Nick warned.

"Fine... I don't see any drunkards here," Karan observed, sounding surprised.

"Of course not... Well, they'll show up occasionally, but they always get kicked out by the proprietor or the other guests. This place doesn't tolerate heavy drinking. There are a few other rules for living here like waiting your turn to use the well water and being quiet at night, but they're not too hard to follow," Nick explained.

"Okay."

"And like I said before, the daily charge is fifteen hundred dina."

"Okay..." She sounded less than thrilled about that.

"We're making a decent amount of money. You can handle it. Also, Bond."

"What is it?"

"If using your human body isn't too much of a burden, please maintain it as much as you can. People will think it's weird if you keep disappearing and reappearing. I don't want the guild to get suspicious."

"If you insist," Bond replied.

The inn they were staying at was an old, worn-down wooden building with the paint peeling off its entrance sign. Despite that, it was still a massive improvement for Karan.

"This place is pretty cheap for the quality. They only let you stay for a period of three days or longer, though, so you have to be careful

of that,” Nick advised.

“Huh... What if you leave for an adventure during that period?” Karan asked.

“They’ll refund you with a twenty percent cancellation fee.”

“Hmm... That sounds like a waste of money.”

“You need to plan out your schedule. It’s unlikely your things will be stolen if you leave them, though. Every room has chests that lock with a magic key.”

“Oh, that’s convenient.”

“Most of the people living here are intermediate adventurers, so thieves have a tough time sneaking in. They get their asses kicked before they can take five steps. This place is safer than some luxury hotels. So what do you think of it?”

“I—I don’t hate it,” Karan responded, turning away in embarrassment. Her tail gave her away—it swayed back and forth gently, showing that she was pleased.

Nick found that charming. “All right, then, it’s settled. Come to my room this evening, Karan,” he said.

“Okay! ...Wait, what?” Karan’s face turned so red, it looked like it might burst into flames.

That evening, Karan went to Nick’s room as instructed.

“Yep, that’s right. Well done,” Nick said.

“Like...this?” Karan asked.

“You catch on quick... Okay, try this one next.”

“These numbers are way too big... My head hurts...”

“Just try it.”

“Okay...”

Karan sighed anxiously. “I—I can’t do it, Nick...”

“Fine, fine. I’ll demonstrate.”

“O-okay...”

“It’s the same as a double-digit calculation. See? First, they bought five swords that cost ninety-eight hundred dina each. It says you get a five percent discount if you buy them in bulk, but you don’t need to worry about that yet. Start by figuring out the total cost.”

Nick and Karan were working diligently on math problems. Nick had bought a beginner’s guide at a bookstore, and Karan—who felt like her head was going to explode—was doing her best to work her way through it.

“Whatever compelled you to waste your evening studying? How boring,” Bond complained as he watched.

“Oh, shut up. I don’t wanna hear that from someone who can just cheat,” Nick quipped.

“Yeah, that’s not fair,” Karan said.

"It is not cheating! My calculation function was installed in the preliminary stages of my development! Besides, you can get by in life just fine without the ability to do math. All you have to do is rely on me," Bond boasted. Karan crossed her arms in irritation.

"I can't trust you," she said.

"E-excuse me?! Why is that?!"

"It's not just you. I can't trust anyone. I will end up in trouble one day if I keep leaving hard tasks to other people."

"...Ah, that's what you meant. You gave me a fright."

"I asked Nick what I can do to avoid being tricked, and then..." Karan glanced at Nick.

"Karan was bad at math, so I decided I would teach her when we had time. You can't keep a ledger if you can't even do basic calculations, and the merchants will eat you for lunch," Nick explained.

"...I didn't expect a sudden invitation to your room, though," Karan grumbled, blushing slightly.

"Did you have plans or something?"

"N-no, I didn't!"

"Huh? Well, sorry," Nick apologized perfunctorily, unsure of why she was upset.

Bond yawned out of boredom. "You are both such hard workers. Is math really so important?"

"It is. If all the party members were stupid, it would be hard to get a rank promotion," Nick answered.

"...Why?"



“First off, there needs to be at least one person who can take care of the paperwork, or the party won’t last.”

“I suppose that would be challenging if the party is all brawn and no brain.”

“Yep. Strong, uneducated people often get recruited by thieves and other criminals. Or they get deceived and roped into crimes before they realize what’s happening. The guild wants to nip that problem in the bud by ensuring its adventurers are educated enough to stay outta trouble.”

The Adventurers Guild welcomed anyone into its ranks, including the illiterate and those without clear identification. That was a necessity because the life-risking nature of the job meant educated folks were never going to join the guild. However, the Labyrinth City authorities and the guild’s top management feared the potential danger of a large number of strong people gathering together and getting bad ideas. What if instead of delving into labyrinths, they decided to team up and attack a store or a warehouse, or form an illegal guild for thievery or smuggling?

It also wasn’t rare for retired adventurers to fall in with outlaws after being unable to find other work. That was especially common among those who’d retired because of injury. As such, the Adventurers Guild wanted to instill its bellicose members with social skills and knowledge that would help them in society and prevent them from turning to a life of crime. That was the other purpose behind wanting its members to be educated.

“Does the guild provide a basic education to its adventurers?” Bond inquired. “I have seen no sign of this.”

“They do. They teach elementary-level classes like writing and math for cheap on the first day of the week. I’ve never been, though,” Nick answered.

“...So it is not free.”

“It was initially, but the guild’s management complained and made them charge for it. That’s why it’s not very popular... There’s also a bunch of old-fashioned losers who think going to class is for weaklings. It’s hard to say if most adventurers agree with the guild’s stance that they should receive a basic education.” Nick sighed.

“It seems like you agree with the guild’s opinion.”

“Yeah, I do. There’re a lot of crooks out there that target adventurers who are bad at math. Many adventurers never had an opportunity to receive an education because they either had no family or came from a rural village with no school. I was a target when I was a kid, too, so studying was a matter of life and death.”

“There are a lot of wicked people in the world, huh?”

"We've all fallen victim to them, you included."

"Ouch. Did you have to put it that way?"

"Saying that out loud made me sad, too."

Nick and Bond both sighed as if they had a headache.

"Anyway, the point is that math is important," Nick said.

"Yes, I see that now. Moving on..." Bond began, changing the subject.

"What is it?"

"I'm bored. Take me somewhere fun."

"So that's what you wanted..." Nick rolled his eyes, but Bond doubled down shamelessly.

"Indeed. We're taking today and tomorrow off, no? As the leader, you should take advantage of this break to recharge."

"We are taking the next two or three days off 'cause it's supposed to rain. We just salvaged you from the Labyrinth of Bonds, too. That was an exhausting mission."

"The party's wallet may be empty, but you should have money to cover your living expenses. Wouldn't you like to head out for at least a little bit? I am sick to death of take-out porridge and bread!"

Nick realized Bond had a point. He was reluctant to spend money at the moment because he had splurged on his idol activities after they received their reward, but it wasn't good behavior as the leader to force that lifestyle upon his roommate. As such, he agreed with Bond's suggestion.

"I'm fine with that, but...Karan, do you want to take a break?" he asked.

"Yes!" Karan exclaimed excitedly. She had clearly been feeling tired as well.

"All right, then, let's head out."

Nick wasn't sure where to eat, but Karan wanted to go to Fromage again, so they went back and were led right to a table.

"I would've thought you'd want to go to a different restaurant this time," Nick said.

"I haven't tried their other dishes yet," Karan responded.

"Are you gonna eat everything on the menu?"

"I had fish last time, so I want to order the meat. Fish can easily turn out dry and bland because of how difficult it is to cook, but here it was moist and had the perfect amount of sauce. The chefs are skilled, so I think the meat will be delicious, too."

"You sure have a discriminating palate..." Nick said.

"Always the gourmand," Bond quipped.

Karan smiled, missing the hint of sarcasm in their compliments.

"I guess I'll get the fish you recommended, Karan. It looked really

good yesterday. What do you want, Bond?" Nick asked.

"I'll have fluffy omelet rice," Bond answered.

"You love that, don't you?"

"I want it with cheese this time."

"Got it. Excuse me!"

Nick called over the waiter and quickly gave their order. They didn't have to wait long for their food to arrive; it apparently didn't take long to cook.

Nick took a bite of the hairtail Karan had recommended.

"Do you like it?" Karan asked, looking strangely anxious.

"What're you so worked up about?" Nick asked.

"Th-this is...the first time I've ever recommended food to someone."

"It's delicious, Karan. You've got good taste."

The flavor didn't have the same impact as meat, but the delicate taste of the fish filled his mouth as he chewed. It smelled nice as well.

Before the formation of Survivors, whenever I came here, I was always too absorbed in trying to please Claudine to appreciate the food, Nick thought self-deprecatingly. This time, I'm gonna make sure I enjoy it.

Karan beamed, unaware of the complex emotions swirling within Nick's heart. "That's right. I'm a gourmet!"

"Man, eating out with you isn't cheap." Karan's cheerful smile cleared the fog in Nick's mind.

Just then, a man and a woman sat at the table behind them. Nick lowered his voice politely, and the others followed suit. They enjoyed a peaceful meal with minimal discussion. It was a relaxing end to a long day...until Nick heard the conversation at the other table.

"So...this is a birthday present for you."

"Aww, you remembered! I'm so happy!"

The second voice sounded familiar, and he swung his head around. A guy and a girl were talking cheerfully. The guy seemed to be a teenager, with gentle features that made it difficult to believe he would hurt anyone. He had clearly been raised well.

The boy wasn't the one who'd grabbed Nick's attention, though. It was the girl. She had soft, glistening blond hair, light armor with a tiger pattern, and a gentle but superficial expression on her face, which to this day still haunted Nick's nightmares.

"No way... That's Claudine..."

It was undoubtedly his ex-girlfriend, the one who'd swindled Nick out of so much money. She opened the fancy box wrapped in a ribbon the boy gave her and smiled ear to ear.

"Wow, I really wanted this one! Thank you so much!" Claudine said, looking joyfully at the necklace she took out of the box. She stroked the gem lovingly, then put it back inside and into her pocket.

"A-are you not going to put it on?" the boy asked.

"That would feel like a waste. It's so pretty... I want to treasure it."

"Th-that makes sense!"

"But...I'm so sorry. There's something important I need to tell you," Claudine said, dropping her gaze and lowering her voice. She looked devastated by what she had to say next.

"Wh-what is it? Is something wrong?"

"I need to go back to my hometown."

"What?!" the boy exclaimed, his face going pale.

"My mom is in critical condition. I have to get back as soon as I can... It sounds like she doesn't have long left."

"That's terrible!"

Claudine continued, sobbing as she spoke, "But my hometown is so far away... It takes a month to get there by carriage. I'm short on money, too... I want to pay Mama back for supporting my choice to become an adventurer in Labyrinth City. I don't know what to do... I feel like my heart is being torn apart!"

"I'll take care of the co— Huh?"

Nick couldn't take it any longer. He couldn't sit back and watch this naive boy get duped. Without even thinking, he plopped down next to him at their table.

"N-Nick...?" Claudine gasped.

"What's up, Claudine?" Nick replied.

"Wh-what are you doing here... I dumped you, remember?!"

She glared at him and broke into a cold sweat. Nick paid her no heed and began to expose her facade.

"When did your mom move so far away? You told me she lives in a post town east of here and that it's a three-day journey to reach. Also, did I hear 'birthday present'? I've never heard of a birthday coming twice in one year."

"...Who are you? Do you know him, Claudine?" the boy asked, looking back and forth between the two in befuddlement. Claudine ignored him and continued to scowl at Nick.

"This has nothing to do with you, Nick!" she seethed.

"Show it to me," Nick demanded.

"Huh?"

"That necklace must've been expensive."

"Wh-why does that matter?"

"It'll absolutely be fraud if you sell it. The talisman I gave you was nothing special, but that necklace is clearly a luxury item of certified value. Do you think you can get away with it the same way?"

"...Let's get out of here. This weirdo isn't gonna leave us alone," Claudine said.

“Huh? But, Claudine. He knows your name...” The boy was totally flustered. He had no idea what was going on. Nick felt sorry for him.

“Can’t have him catch on to your act... Wait a second. I don’t see the Iron Tiger Troop guys. Where are they?” Nick asked.

The impatience disappeared from Claudine’s face. “What, do you think they’re with me all the time? We join up for our adventures. You know, like an adventurer’s party is supposed to. Do you have a problem with that?” she asked bluntly.

That simple answer only deepened Nick’s misgivings. Claudine was right in that party members weren’t always together, but he still felt like she was lying. Nick had guessed the Iron Tiger Troop formed for more than just adventures. The way they exploited Nick was too calculated, too skillful. At the very least, Nick was sure that Claudine didn’t dump him on a whim.

Also, if they were extorting people for money as a group, it didn’t make much sense for her to be alone when accepting money and valuable items. They needed someone on the lookout to ensure that their modus operandi wasn’t discovered or that the person receiving the valuables didn’t betray the group.

So why was she alone? Nick began to speculate aloud. “Maybe deceiving this guy isn’t the end game here. Are you fleeing from Leon and the Iron Tiger Troop? You’re gonna clear your accounts and use this money to skip town, aren’t you?”

“H-huh?! What are you saying?!” It was Claudine’s turn to become flustered. Her face twisted with anger, worse than he had ever seen.

Nick repressed the impulse to start cursing. Losing his cool and entering a shouting match would only benefit her. If an employee came over, she would just sweet-talk him with a plausible lie and escape. What could he do to get back at her?

It was simple. By helping the confused boy sitting next to him.

“Give the necklace back to him, Claudine,” Nick demanded.

“U-um...do you know her?” the boy asked. He had been sitting there in timid silence.

He was well dressed; Nick guessed he was either the son of a well-to-do merchant family or of nobility. What would happen if it came to light that Claudine had seduced and swindled a noble? She probably had an escape route planned out, but this was undoubtedly more dangerous than preying on a fellow adventurer.

Man, what an idiot..., Nick thought, but then reconsidered. *Though I guess I don’t have much right to insult her intelligence as one of the victims who fell for her act hook, line, and sinker.*

“L-let’s go. There’s something seriously wrong with this guy,” Claudine urged.

“B-but, Claudine... He doesn’t just know your name. He knows

your party name and party leader, too,” the boy protested.

“Anyone could find that out if they wanted to!”

“Are you gonna run away with that necklace, Claudine? Do you really wanna live as a wanted jewelry thief?” Nick asked, implicitly reminding her that they could report her at any time. She might have been able to trick one person at a time, but her lies and contradictions would be exposed with the testimony of two victims.

“...God dammit!” Claudine screamed. She hurled the box containing the necklace at him, her face full of rage, then sprinted out of the restaurant with the nimbleness of a wildcat. Nick had to hand it to her—she sure knew how to make a getaway.

“Geez, that was close. The necklace could’ve broken,” Nick said after catching the box. He returned it to the boy.

“Th-thank you very much... Can I call you Nick, by the way?” he asked.

“Sure. Sorry for butting in like that.”

“Don’t worry about it. I have a question...”

“What?”

“I—I think I know the answer already, but was I being duped...?” His face was pale, as if he thought the world was ending. Nick had no choice but to be the bearer of bad news.

“Well...yeah.”

“I—I can’t...believe it...”

“If you want to sue, I’ll help you out... I’m a victim of hers, too.”

“I—I see... Um, I’m grateful that you helped me, but I need some time to process this...”

“Yep. Totally fair.”

“Sorry... And thank you again.”

The boy bowed, looking on the verge of tears. While Nick did feel bad for him, he also hoped the boy was grateful that he would at least be able to get his money back. Nick hadn’t been so lucky.

“Hey! Nick!” Karan dragged Nick out of his thoughts by violently grabbing his shoulders.

“Whoa... Oh, hey, Karan. Sorry ’bout all that.”

“Explain yourself! It looked like you were going to start a fight!” she yelled.

“I—I’m sorry...”

Nick turned to Karan and Bond and apologized.

“...I see.”

After Nick explained what they had just witnessed, the fury on Karan’s face was as frightening as hell itself. Bond, on the other hand, looked perplexed by her reaction.

“Wh-what has you so worked up? What she did is certainly

detestable, but you look like you want to kill her,” he said.

“Of course I do! That bitch should go to hell!”

“Eek,” Bond yelped, frightened by Karan’s fierce response.

“She feels that way because she...well, all of us in this party have been deceived by someone we trusted. I only have myself to blame for being dumb enough to spend money on her in the first place, though,” Nick explained.

“Why didn’t you tell me? I would’ve incinerated her,” Karan said.

“Whoa there. That would’ve burned down the whole café.”

“I would’ve done it outside, then... Don’t hold back next time we see her, Nick.”

“Okay. Uh...thanks.”

Karan’s violent words actually calmed Nick down. She cared for him, which made him not want to involve her and the rest of his companions in an attempt at petty revenge. He had already cornered that miscreant. He had proof of her committing fraud and had threatened to use it; he doubted she would be preying on a new victim anytime soon. He decided he might as well forget about her.

However, the events of the next day caught him totally off guard.

A Duel Develops



It started at the Fishermen Adventurers Guild. The five Survivors were gathered at a table to discuss work.

"I think it's time you guys learned how to do collection jobs," Nick began.

"Okay," Karan responded.

"Understood," Zem said.

"Sweet. I'll bet those pay well," Tiana cheered.

"That sounds boring!" Bond complained.

"Collection jobs usually ask you to gather vegetation that only grows in labyrinths. It's almost always medicinal herbs, poisonous plants, and other things used to make medicine. Zem might be more helpful than me with that kinda stuff. There are also requests for ore found in cave labyrinths, but those are really difficult unless you're a dwarf raised in the mountains or someone who's worked in a mine. But you get a huge reward in return..." Nick explained.

"Oh, that's why gems from labyrinths are so expensive," Tiana said.

"Yep, the value of those jewels has been increasing exponentially. There are even adventurers who specialize in mining—"

Their conversation was interrupted when a pitcher of ale was dumped over Nick's head.

"That was my treat, Nick. Go ahead, drink it up. You almost look sexy drenched like that."

"You've brightened up since I last saw ya, bud."

The person who'd poured ale on Nick's head was none other than Claudine. A large tigerian man stood behind her, mocking Nick with vulgar laughter.

Karan jumped to her feet, toppling her chair as she did so. She

gripped her sword handle as she glared at them with silent, murderous rage.

“Hold on, Karan,” Nick commanded.

“But—,” she protested.

“Let me talk with them. Your name was, uh...Leon, right?” Nick asked, looking at the large man, who nodded exaggeratedly in response.

Leon was a dark-skinned tigerian. He had thick, muscular arms and legs, and his hair was black and gold like a tiger’s. He looked like a dangerous man.

“Damn right. I’m Leon of the Iron Tiger Troop. I hear you gave our Claudine a hard time last night,” he said with a fiendish smile. Claudine hid behind him as a shield and smirked.

“Yeah, that’s right. It was like torturing a scared rat. I felt bad for her, honestly,” Nick responded.

“What did you say?!” Claudine shrieked.

“Oh, gimme a break. Weren’t you planning on taking the necklace and running?” Nick challenged.

“Heh, I’ll bet all women seem like villains to a loser like you,” Leon mocked, unfazed. Nick suspected Claudine had already spun some excuse to protect herself against that accusation. But that hardly mattered right now. Nick knew what he needed to do—pick a fight with Leon.

“Do you crooks lose all sense of a human conscience the more time you spend together? Lay off the booze and do some honest work for once,” Nick taunted.

“Ha, if you’re lookin’ for a fight, I’m game... Let’s take this outside. Fights and duels are prohibited in the guild. Relax, this’ll be one-on-one.” Leon jerked his chin toward the doors.

Nick stood up without hesitation.

“Nick, no!” Karan protested anxiously.

“I’ll be fine. This isn’t my first fight,” he answered, patting her gently on the shoulder.

The alley behind the Fishermen Adventurers Guild was deserted. It was an unwritten rule among adventurers to take any fights outside, which naturally led them to this spot. That also meant people avoided the place unless they had a reason to be there so others wouldn’t think they were out to start trouble.

Nick strained his ears to catch anyone lurking nearby, then began clenching and opening his hands to prepare for throwing punches. Leon walked about ten steps ahead of Nick and turned around.

“Is this spot good?” he asked. Nick nodded in response and readied his fists, but then Leon did something unexpected. “Man, sorry

'bout before! You didn't deserve all that!"

"...Huh?"

Leon bowed in apology. Nick stared at him, dumbfounded by his sudden change of attitude.

"To be honest, I underestimated you. Claudine told me you were just some wuss, but you rebounded quickly after she dumped you. That's a nice party you've formed. Gatherin' people and leadin' them is no small feat."

"...Okay."

"I owe you for puttin' Claudine in her place, too. That girl's cunning as they come. Take my eyes off her for a second, and she tries to betray me."

"...Huh?"

Leon approached Nick in such a friendly manner, it was as if he had never been mad at all, and he gently patted Nick on the shoulder.

"I have a proposal," the tigerian said.

"Proposal?"

"I'll give you Claudine. She's all yours."

"What the hell does that mean?" Nick asked, unsure of Leon's intention.

"She's a good girl, but she can be a real bitch, too, if you know what I mean. She's more trouble than she's worth. I can only take workin' or hangin' out with her for so long. And honestly, servin' as her bodyguard has gotten exhausting."

"..."

"She's deceived a lotta people, which means there's an ever-growing crowd of people who hate her guts. I'm sure you count yourself among that number. Our partnership's been a successful one, but it's run its course. I've been thinkin' about given' up the game and tossin' her to one of her former victims."

"Oh, I see. You want to sell her to me."

"I'll give you all the help you want if you put it in writin' that you won't sue me. Temptin' offer, right?"

"...In what world did you think I would accept that? Do I look like the type who would get involved in the slave trade? Plus, if a crook like you can't even handle her, I'm not gonna take her on."

"You can just sell her to a brothel once you get sick of her. Also..."

"What now?"

"I see you workin' with that dragonian girl, and aristocratic-lookin' lady, and that naive priest. I know exactly what you're doing, you sly dog," Leon said with a smirk.

"What're you getting at?" Nick asked.

"The dragonian girl is called a 'Survivor' 'cause she was a total

idiot and got deceived, right? And the other two are outsiders who don't know the city. You're just as much a crook as I am."

"I'm not following."

Leon smirked and shrugged. "You don't have to play dumb with me. You're swindling them to make a profit just like Claudine and I do with our victims. I know how you feel. There's no way you'd want to help people out of the goodness of your heart after Claudine played you like a sucker."

"Oh, I see... Ha-ha-ha..." The confusion vanished from Nick's face. He looked down, then burst into laughter, convulsing until he had to hold his sides.

Nick had been taught not to let anyone see your eyes when you faked laughter. That was something he'd learned from his late father rather than Argus, his mentor. Your eyes gave you away immediately.

It wasn't unnatural to cast your gaze down in this moment, but if that wasn't an option, you could also hide your eyes with your hands or clap your hands exaggeratedly. Nick's father believed there were times you needed to convince your opponent that you were harmless to them. He was kind to his family and had the courage to wield a sword when needed, but he could be surprisingly underhanded in his work as a peddler.

Nick felt a pang of nostalgia for those days as he burned with rage directed at Leon.

"Ah-ha-ha! It feels good, right?!" Leon said, joining in the laughter.

"Ah-ha-ha! Hoo man, my stomach hurts... Ha-ha...", Nick cackled.

"So, Nicky-poo. Let me get in on—*oof!*"

Nick interrupted Leon mid-sentence with an uppercut to the jaw, sending him flying into the wall of the back alley.

"Say that again, you asshole!" Nick yelled.

"You goddamn twerp... Is that how you repay an act of kindness?!" Leon fumed, staggering to his feet. Blood trickled from his lip.

"You call that kindness? There's no way in hell you're telling the truth about selling Claudine to me. You're just trying to swindle me again 'cause I look like I'm doing well for myself. I see right through you, you big oaf," Nick accused.

"Heh, only the weak live in constant fear of being tricked. You're just as much of a coward as you are short."

"Did you really think I was gonna believe you? Even on the off chance your offer is real, punching you feels a hell of a lot better. Also, are you really a tigerian? Dragonians are much stronger."

Leon's eyes were full of malice. He drew the scimitar at his back and charged at Nick soundlessly, entering striking range with startling

speed. He was clearly intent on killing him.

“Huh?!”

Nick was ready. He swung his dagger to meet the scimitar, surprising Leon as the clang of steel on steel echoed in the alley.

“Tch, where’d you get the reflexes to match a beastman... Just give up and die!” Leon yelled.

“Don’t think you can easily beat me one-on-one,” Nick responded.

“Shut up! You’re just a pathetic brat who got kicked out of his party!”

Nick kicked the inside of Leon’s leg but once again heard the sound of metal on metal.

“Crap, you got something underneath your clothes,” Nick cursed.

“You’re one to talk! Wh-what’s that on your feet?!” Leon shouted.

Nick felt metal with that kick. He didn’t think it was chainmail; Leon was protecting his legs with some kind of plate armor. They were clearly both very cautious people.

They moved ten steps apart again.

“Ha!” This time Nick moved first, charging low enough that his arms nearly touched the ground.

“Damn!” Leon swore, retreating a step after deciding he couldn’t block the dagger. Instead of swinging it, however, Nick wrapped himself around Leon’s lower body like a snake. “What’re you doing?!”

Before Leon realized what was happening, Nick had sheathed his dagger to make use of both hands. He tackled Leon to the ground and used his knees to restrain the tigerian’s right hand, which was holding the scimitar.

“Sorry, I’m pretty good at grappling,” Nick said.

“...Heh, we’ll see about that,” Leon responded with an odd grin. Nick got a bad feeling.

“Wind Blast!”

“Gah!”

A blast of compressed wind flew at Nick’s back. He dove to the side to dodge it, but it still grazed him. Thrown off balance, Nick retreated to put some distance between himself and Leon.

“That was a close one. Didn’t expect him to push you down like that.”

“Nice timing, Begg.”

The man who attacked Nick from behind seemed to be a mage. Nick vaguely remembered him. He was the other man who’d been there when Claudine dumped him.

“You cheating bastard... What happened to this being one-on-one?!” Nick yelled. He had been caught totally off guard. He thought he was being wary of their surroundings, but he still missed the approach of Leon’s ally. A chill ran down his back.

“Ha, you shouldn’t have let yourself get ambushed, you foo—,” Begg responded, but was interrupted when fingers twisted around his neck.

“What was that about getting ambushed?”

“Gack...”

Karan had snuck up behind him, her eyes burning with anger. She easily lifted the mage off the ground.

“Karan! Thank you!” Nick said.

“I tried to warn you, Nick...” She sighed.

This wasn’t over yet. The mage had gone pale in the face, but Leon clearly still wanted to fight. Nick had a bad feeling that if this continued, one of them was going to die.

“Stop right there, you morons!”

An old woman’s angry yell brought everyone to a halt.

“V-Vilma?! What are *you* doing here?!” Nick exclaimed.

They all turned in the direction of the bellow to see Vilma wearing a simple white shirt and a navy-gray skirt. She was a member of the Adventurers Guild’s management and a retired adventurer of advanced rank. She may have no longer been active, but she still outmatched any intermediate adventurer. There was no one in the Fishermen Adventurers Guild reckless enough to oppose her.

“Don’t give me that! You know full well what you’re doing!” she yelled back.

“Ow.”

Vilma threw a pen at Nick, hitting him square in the forehead. He elected not to dodge it to avoid putting her in a worse mood.

“Did you really just take that hit to avoid upsetting me more? Kids these days...”

“What should I have done, then?!”

“Back down, obviously.”

“...Got it. Sorry.” Nick reluctantly bowed in apology and relaxed his guard.

“It’s Leon, right? You too. And Karan, let that imbecile go,” Vilma ordered.

“...Tch.”

Leon glared daggers at Vilma, but he obediently sheathed his scimitar. Nick and Leon both knew this wasn’t worth making an enemy of the guild. Karan let go of Begg’s neck with an expression of disinterest, and Begg raced toward Leon, coughing from the choke hold.

“...So what are you going to do?” Vilma asked.

“Huh? I thought you came to stop us,” Nick said.

“I came to stop you from killing each other. I’ll allow you to continue your fight if you establish clear rules, like prohibiting

weapons.”

Leon grinned wickedly. “Yeah, that’s more like it. A duel with set rules sounds like a hell of a lot more fun than this. What do you say to doin’ it the Fishermen way?”

“The Fishermen way? What does that mean?” Nick asked.

“Oh, you’ve never done it before, Nicky-poo? I’ll teach you,” Leon said, still grinning. Nick glared at him, but the tigerian continued without a care, “It’s called bare-knuckle math.”

From those words, silence fell upon the alley. After a bit, Nick spoke up with a look of bewilderment on his face. “The hell is that? Are you pulling my leg?”

“It’s a real thing, I swear!” Leon yelled angrily.

Nick, Leon, and the rest of the Survivors and the Iron Tiger Troop were hounded into a room in the guild. Anger was visible on all of their faces. Nick told his party members about Claudine and Leon’s unsavory operation, which brought them fully on board with the duel.

Leon and Claudine seethed with hostility toward Nick. Claudine glared at him reproachfully; it was hard to believe she’d ever planned on betraying her leader. Begg, the final member of the Iron Tiger Troop, just sat there whistling to himself, which only added to the ominous atmosphere.

“I’ll explain the rules. I’m assuming none of you know how this works, right?” Vilma asked, looking at the Survivors.

“No clue. Is this really so well known?” Nick responded, and Vilma nodded seriously.

“A lot of adventurers are all brawn and no brain. A fistfight might be the easiest way for those dolts to settle a dispute, but the guild can’t have its members throwing haymakers to solve everything. It’d be total chaos. To prevent that, a different kind of bout was conceived. It’s called bare-knuckle math.”

“...Is the duel decided with fighting *and* math? Are you sure this isn’t a joke?”

“Have you really never heard of it? Oh right, you never went to classes at the guild,” Vilma remarked.

“Classes? ...Oh, those,” Nick said.

The Adventurers Guild held writing, math, and other classes to provide a basic education for members who never had a chance to go to elementary school. Nick had received schooling as a peddler’s son before he joined the guild, so he had no need for them.

“The guild was having a hard time convincing many of the uneducated meatheads to come to class, so this branch decided to offer a little reward to any who showed up,” Vilma said.

“And what was it?” Nick asked.

“Any adventurer who gets a math problem right earns the privilege of punching a teacher.”

“Holy crap... Have any of these teachers died?”

“We don’t let anyone teach who could be killed by a punch from the intermediate adventurers who work here,” Vilma answered, smiling as if she found his question amusing. Many guild employees were former advanced adventurers, including her. They could definitely take a hit or two from the adventurers who frequented Fishermen.

“And that’s where bare-knuckle math came from?”

“Yes. The adventurers decided to mimic the rules and use them for dueling. Are you convinced it’s not a joke yet?”

“I don’t get this custom at all... Anyway, can you explain the rules in more detail?”

“First, each party decides who will be their bare-knuckle boxer. It’s standard practice to choose the people who started the conflict in the first place. Next—”

“We do a lottery to decide which party members do the math test, and they compete with each other for the higher score. The one with the lower score will have their party’s boxer take one punch without dodging. Is that right?” Leon finished for Vilma with a smirk.

The old woman nodded. “Yeah, that’s right.”

“Whoa, hold on. We should get to choose who does the math test,” Nick protested.

“It’s possible for adventurers to make up for the presence of a weak member, but that person may not be able to help if their party members happen to make a mistake. And one person’s blunder can potentially lead to the death of an entire party. We decide the test taker with a lottery to mirror that,” Vilma explained.

“...I don’t want to say this, but is there anything else we can do? This all seems kinda silly,” Nick said.

“Bare-knuckle math is serious business! Most adventurers are reckless idiots! We need to train our brains!” Leon yelled.

“I get that, but what does that have to do with us?” Nick asked, confused.

Leon cackled. “Heh, gettin’ cold feet?”

“Excuse me?”

“I admit, I think it’s a stupid tradition, too. But I’m glad for it—you know why? It’ll make punching a slippery little rat like you a piece of cake.”

“Must be tough to be a tiger who can’t hunt,” Nick jabbed in response to the threat.

Just when the two of them looked like they could come to blows, a puff of smoke entered their vision, followed by a pair of alluring

lips.

“Phew...” Tiana exhaled.

“T-Tiana, why are you smoking?” Nick asked nervously.

“Why? The reason’s simple,” she answered. Tiana normally didn’t smoke around the party. She only ever did so in her room, at the racetrack, or at the casino. Her eyes contained a murderous rage reminiscent of when the party first met her. “I’m trying to keep from sending these assholes in front of me down to hell.”

She blew smoke at Leon and his party members in an obvious threat. Leon trembled with anger, veins bulging in his forehead.

“...You’ve got some nerve, girl. You clearly care for your friends,” he said.

“I simply hate people like you. I wish you would drop dead. I feel like I’m losing brain cells just listening to you... Oh, can I borrow an ashtray?”

Tiana put her feet up on the table and crossed her legs, which were clad in black tights, and continued to smoke her pipe. This gangster-like attitude from a girl with the beauty of a doll gave her a devilish charm that rendered the men in the room speechless. Even the enraged Leon flinched back slightly.

“Mind your manners. This is your leader’s fight,” Vilma admonished.

“Oh, my apologies,” Tiana responded without any contrition whatsoever. “Anyway, I understand the logic. Bare-knuckle math requires a party to fight with their fists and brain. But what do you do if the round ends in a tie?”

“We keep going until someone is knocked out in the boxing match. We start with a round of bare-knuckle boxing, then hold the test and repeat.”

“That makes sense,” Nick said with a nod.

Tiana wasn’t finished. “By the way, we’re betting something on this duel, right? There has to be more at stake than an apology to the winner. We aren’t children.”

“Damn straight we are,” Leon answered with an evil grin. “Nicky-poo. You punched me outta nowhere. If I win, you have to pay me five hundred thousand dina in damages.”

“You provoked me with your bullshit,” Nick snapped.

“Heh, say whatever you like. I won’t bend on those terms. What are yours?” Leon asked. Nick began to think, and Tiana interjected.

“Return everything you stole,” she said.

“Excuse me?” Leon responded.

“You heard me. Everything you unjustly stole from Nick and all your other victims. You must’ve stashed it all away somewhere. I’m saying you have to return all of it.”

There was a darkness in Tiana's eyes. They contained the vengeful spirit of someone who knew how painful it was to have something important stolen from them and was fed up with the injustice and unfairness in the world.

"This is Nick's fight, Tiana. He should decide—," Zem reprimanded her, but Nick interrupted him.

"No, I like it. I'll go with Tiana's suggestion," he said.

"Are you sure?" Tiana asked.

"Yeah. You read my mind. My only demand is that you give it all back, Leon."

"...Got it. The terms are set," Leon agreed.

Vilma turned to Nick. "What do you think, Nick? Do you accept this duel?"

Nick was unsure. He had regained his composure, thanks to Tiana's words. Leon was the one who'd proposed this duel. He would not have done that if he wasn't sure they could win. He was clearly familiar with this format.

"Hey, Tiana..." Nick began, intending to calm everyone down, but Tiana had a stubborn look in her eyes. She was not going to listen to him.

"...Nick," Tiana said.

"What?" Nick replied.

"We're going to win," Tiana insisted.

"Yeah," Karan agreed.

"Let us show them what we are made of," Zem added.

His party members all sounded determined—they wanted to prove they weren't weaklings who were going to let a good-for-nothing like Leon walk all over them. They were called the Survivors for a reason. Remaining tenacious and emerging from any kind of trap with their lives in hand was kind of their thing.

"All right. Let's do it."

"Nick and Leon will handle the fistfight. You two will take the written exam," Vilma said, looking toward the two women who were drawn in the lottery.

"Haah, whatever. I'll do your stupid test." Claudine sighed, shrugging. Her indifferent attitude was betrayed by the mocking look in her eyes—she clearly believed her victory to be guaranteed. "I already feel guilty about having to face this stupid dragonian, though."

"...Hmph," Karan grunted. She had been chosen in the lottery.

"Wouldn't you rather face me?! Are you just going to ignore my challenge?!" Tiana shouted angrily, but Claudine just grinned.

"Ah-ha-ha, nothing will come of complaining about the results of

the lottery, you dumbass,” she said scornfully.

“Do you speak that way to people because of your pea-sized brain?” Karan retorted.

Claudine’s face twisted with rage. “...I see you can toss around insults, at least.”

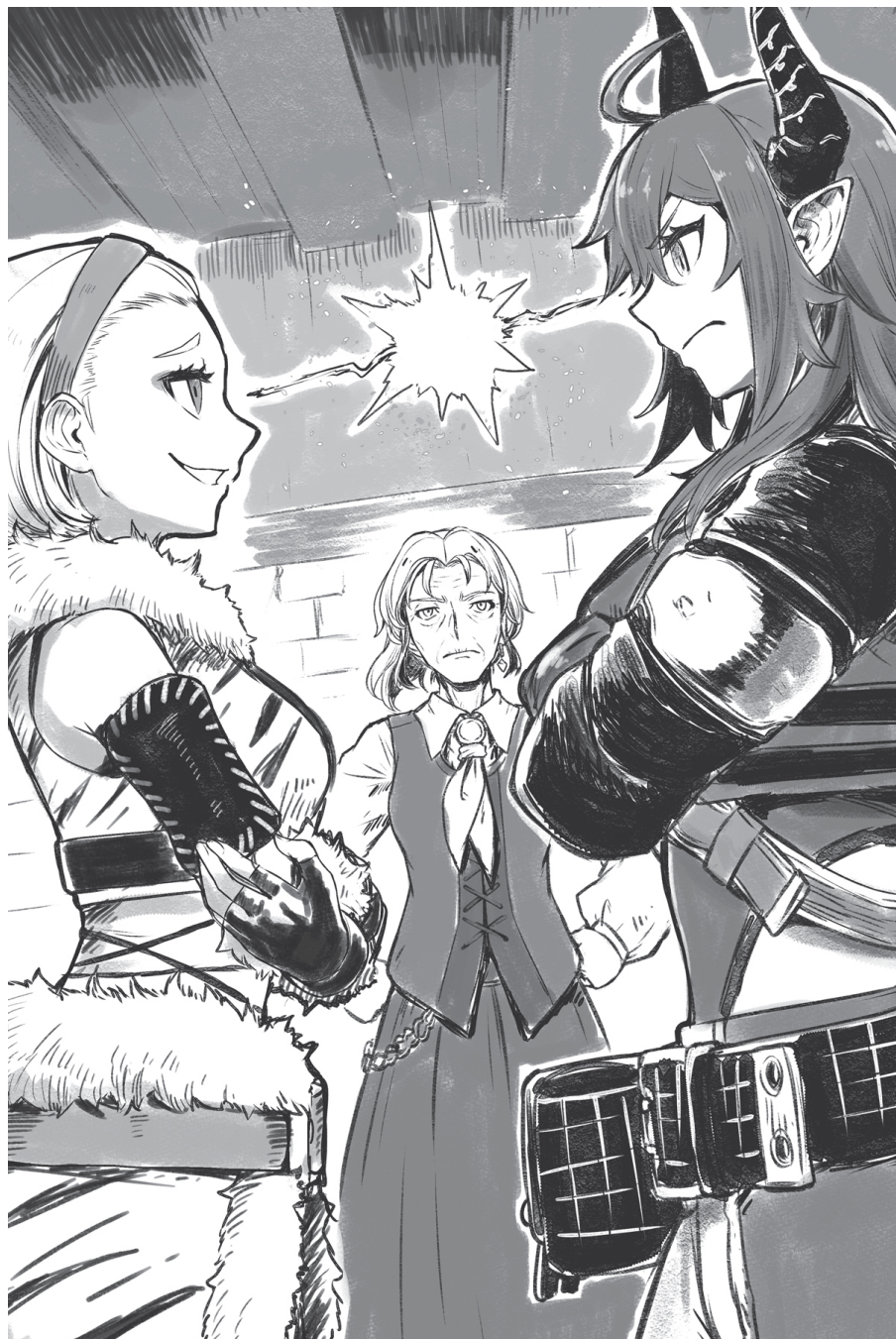
“The duel is one week from today. We’ll prepare the ring on the roof of the guild. Make sure to get ready,” Vilma said.

“Yeah, yeah,” Claudine responded.

“Got it,” Karan said.

The two women’s fierce competitive spirit burned.

“Is there really nowhere else to hold our meetings besides my apartment?”



The five Survivors gathered in Tiana's apartment. Nick turned to the complaining Tiana and bowed his head.

"I'm sorry about this," he said.

"Huh? Oh, I'm not really blaming you. I was able to clean up, so it's not that big of a deal," Tiana responded, flustered by watching Nick get down on his knees and bow to her.

"No, I'm not talking about that. I'm apologizing for starting a duel."

"Oh, that. I don't really mind."

"I roped you guys into a personal fight, though..."

"Listen up, Nick," Tiana said as if speaking to a small child. "I don't know who that dumb housecat thinks he is, but if my leader was the kind of person who couldn't stand up to a fraudster, I would leave the party."

"But..."

"Now that I think about it, why hasn't he been arrested already? The guild is aware of his crimes. Vilma could serve as a witness."

"Sometimes the guild doesn't sweat the finer details... Also, you have to go to the Sun Knights to sue someone for fraud, not the guild."

"The Sun Knights?" Tiana repeated as a question.

"They're an order of knights who protect the peace in Labyrinth City. They're under the direct supervision of this region's lord."

"Aren't you going to report him to them, then?"

"...I think that would work," Nick said.

He put a hand to his chin and thought. If he reported Leon together with the boy from the café who Claudine had deceived, the Sun Knights would probably take action. There was a chance they had already begun to look into him. Finding more of his victims would probably give them a higher chance of success. He had his concerns, though.

"Problem is, I don't know how long it would take. They could even order me to cooperate with the investigation, cutting into my work time. That's why adventurers prefer to settle things with a fight rather than involve the Sun Knights... Vilma probably just thinks that would drag things out unnecessarily."

Duels had legally binding force in the Holy Kingdom of Dineez. Any agreements that involved illegal activities such as slavery were rendered invalid, but as long as the terms were lawful, anything was allowed. There were even many who considered the terms of a duel as a holy contract and saw participation in one as a show of bravery. People like adventurers who felt a need to prove their strength tended to start a lot of duels.

"She could've at least asked you for the whole story," Tiana said.

“Maybe she would have if I hadn’t gotten carried away and drawn my dagger back there... Now it just looks like both of us are to blame,” Nick answered.

“Oh, that’s why she wants you to settle it with a duel.”

“I think I’m just gonna go explain the situation to the guild one more time for now. There might be other adventurers who are victims of Leon’s. Let’s hold off on going to the Sun Knights, though.”

“Why?”

“There’s a good chance they’ll step in and void the duel. We’ll do it after I kick his ass.”

Tiana and the others smiled happily at Nick’s words.

“If you have to do this, you’d better win. Scratch that—you *will* win,” Tiana said.

“Yeah! We’ll make them pay for taking us lightly!” Karan exclaimed.

“Let’s teach them a much-needed lesson,” Zem added.

“I—I appreciate the support, but I’ve barely told you guys anything yet. I was gonna fill you in. Is it just me, or are you guys not surprised by this at all?” Nick asked.

“Oh, Bond told me about the incident you had with that slimy bitch,” Tiana answered.

“That doesn’t explain how quickly you broke up my fight.”

“Oh, that...” Tiana looked toward Bond.

“I heard everything,” he explained.

“What do you mean? You weren’t in the alley,” Nick responded.

“No, I wasn’t.”

“Then how...?” Nick trailed off. “You used some ability of yours again, didn’t you? That’s not fair!”

“It is too!” Bond seethed. “I have already told you that I have sharp eyes and ears.”

“So you heard everything we said out there.”

“Do not chide me for eavesdropping. You were alone with a dangerous ruffian. Karan was near tears.”

“Hey! I was not crying!” Karan shouted.

“Oh. Uh...,” Nick began, looking conflicted.

Bond smirked. “What is it?”

“Sorry for snapping at you. And thanks for saving me.”

“Why, it was nothing.” Bond reclined arrogantly in his chair.

“So did you guys get Vilma?” Nick asked.

“No, we did not. She was already on her way by the time I sensed the fight in the alley,” Bond answered.

“Really? Someone must’ve seen me, then. Or maybe...”

Nick began to think.

Tiana looked at him quizzically. “Don’t tell me the guild

employees and the Iron Tiger Troop are working together?" she asked with a grimace.

"No, I don't think so. It's not like anyone in the Iron Tiger Troop is some kind of big shot—they're just an ordinary adventurer party. Plus, if they had the influence to work with guild employees, they wouldn't need to work as adventurers."

"I guess so."

"Anyway, we need to prepare. Sorry, but we're gonna have to postpone next week's adventure."

"Okay!" Karan exclaimed.

"Got it," Tiana said.

"Understood," Zem responded.

"I suppose we must," Bond said.

They all agreed without argument.

"Karan and I are gonna practice for the duel. Karan," Nick began, looking toward the dragonian.

"Hmm?"

"I need you to memorize everything we teach you. Zem and Tiana are gonna help, but since your name was drawn, you're a part of this now. Got it?"

"...Y-yeah."

Karan did her best not to shrink from the dangerous gleam in Nick's eyes.

In the Darkness



Karan was working on math problems with Zem and Bond in a private room at a café.

“...All right,” Zem said.

“H-how did I do?” Karan asked.

She was solving questions that had been used in previous duels at the Fishermen Adventurers Guild. There were basic arithmetic, ratio, and geometry problems where you had to give the shortest route to the solution—all patterned after calculations adventurers were likely to face in their daily work.

“You got sixty percent correct.”

“O-okay...” Karan sighed.

“You do not have to aim for perfection, you know. Nick should be fine as long as you get a decent score,” Zem consoled her as he corrected her answers.

It was true that the math test did not determine the outcome of the duel. All it did was affect the bare-knuckle boxing match by giving an advantage to the teammate of whoever got the higher score.

“...But I don’t want Nick to have a hard time because of me.”

“He will not blame you.”

If one person did significantly worse than the other on the math test, however, it would create a sizable handicap in the boxing match. The math-deficient party member would basically give their opponent a free punch every round. That was why Karan needed to keep up with Claudine.

“Good grief. You should just use me. I do not understand the reluctance to do so,” Bond said, leaning back in his chair.

They had a method to guarantee Karan’s victory—they could simply have Bond solve all the problems. If they used his Search and

Telepathy abilities, they could cheat without anyone realizing it.

This method occurred to all of them the moment the duel's format was proposed. Even Nick, who had lost his temper, realized they had Bond. Nick would still have to win the boxing match, but they could ace the math test without issue. Despite that, they all decided they wanted to avoid using Bond if possible. If they had no choice, they would put aside their honor and prioritize their survival, but they didn't want to cheat from the very start.

The Adventurers Guild had a reason for incorporating a math test into the duel format. A good number of adventurers who came from the countryside ended up getting deceived like Karan. There was a large disparity in education between the rural areas and the city, and many people couldn't read or write, let alone do basic math. They were easy targets for people used to Labyrinth City, and their lack of schooling made it difficult for them to even seek help.

The only way to help prevent those newcomers in Labyrinth City from meeting a tragic fate was to educate them. To this end, the Adventurers Guild kept an eye on parties that had a member who clearly had a rural upbringing, and the guild occasionally instructed those parties to provide them an education. Forcing math into duels was also part of an effort to correct the adventurers' tendency to rely on violence.

Unfortunately, it couldn't be said that the initiative was going well. The way Karan's previous party, White Heron, didn't let her do anything other than fight and even kept her from talking to the guild employees was evidence of that.

"We have our reasons for not doing so," Zem responded.

"Would cheating not be preferable to losing for some trivial principles?" Bond asked.

"Yes, I agree with you there."

"Hmm? Then why are you not using me?"

"Nick said we should save you as a last resort. Also..."

"Yes?"

"This is just my personal opinion, but no matter how impressive your skills are, there is a risk of being discovered. We should not ignore the possibility that someone could have heard of Telepathy, and even if no one has, someone could sense that something is wrong. Thus, I agree with the stance of using your abilities as a last resort and trying to manage without them."

"Hmm... I suppose you have a point," Bond agreed reluctantly.

Karan, however, looked worried. "...But, Zem...", she muttered.

"What is wrong, Karan?" Zem asked.

"Will my turn even come? The duel will be over if Nick defeats Leon in the first round, right?"

“...Hmm, I do not think we can count on that.”

“Is Leon really that strong?”

Karan had been turning that question over in her mind. There was no way Nick could lose in a fistfight to an adventurer of Leon's level. He'd looked like a man possessed when he fought the ogre one-on-one in Goblin Forest wielding only a dagger. And Nick knew how to make up for a size disadvantage in a fight. She couldn't imagine that the tigerian could defeat him. At the very least, she was positive Nick would have won their fight in the alley behind the guild if Leon hadn't received help.

“I do not really know how to assess strength, but Nick told me something before he left. He said your turn is going to come. That means we need to prepare,” Zem answered.

“I'll do my best, then...,” Karan said, although she seemed to lack confidence.

“...Karan. What do you think our goal is here?”

“To win the duel, right?”

“No, not quite. That is just the means.”

Karan cocked her head in confusion. “Then...is it to defeat the Iron Tiger Troop and prevent them from hurting anyone else?”

“...That is not a bad answer. It will be satisfying indeed to see them put in their place,” Zem said with a malicious smile.

“You're scarier than a gangster when you say stuff like that, Zem.”

“I-is that so?” Zem looked slightly hurt, and Karan giggled.

“I didn't mean that as an insult. So what's our goal?”

“Like Tiana said, our goal is to take back everything that was stolen.”

“Oh...” Karan sat up with a serious expression.

“That is why it is important for you to study. Simply winning is not enough—we need to win in a way that feels just,” Zem explained.

“Okay, I understand... By the way, where are Nick and Tiana? I haven't seen them since they left to train,” Karan asked.

“They are likely just arriving at Shadow Wolf Cave now.”

“I wish I could've gone with them...”

“Let's take a break after you solve these problems. I am going out tonight.”

“You have it so easy... I'm jealous.”

Zem looked offended. “I am not going out for pleasure. There is something I need to do... Anyway, it is time we get back to work.”

Karan sighed, tightened her headband, and threw herself back into studying the workbook.

Despite its imposing name, Shadow Wolf Cave was a labyrinth meant for novice adventurers. It was a cave labyrinth five floors deep and

populated by wolves called shadow wolves that had excellent night vision. Their limited strength and stamina made them weaker than dogs raised by professional tamers, but their agility and skill at hiding in the dark often caught newbies off guard. Shadow Wolf Cave was the most difficult labyrinth G-rank adventurers could enter.

“Hi-yah!”

“Yipe!”

Nick punched a charging shadow wolf with perfect precision, causing it to collapse with a yelp. Two more came at him next. One leaped from above, and the other hunched down to get him from below.

“Bad call, beastie. Jumping like that limits your ability to move.”

Nick moved as quick as a wolf himself, swinging his leg like a scythe to kick the leaping monster out of the air.

“Rawr?!”

The beast crashed down into the other shadow wolf.

“Take that!” Nick shouted before striking both shadow wolves with his fist. He took out three of them in no time.

“...Impressive. That looked like magic,” Tiana said.

“Don’t be stupid. Anyone with a mastery of martial arts can sneak up on a shadow wolf without relying on magic,” Nick snapped.

“Sorry, I don’t know anything about martial arts.”

The two traveled and entered the cave together. Nick wanted to sharpen his hand-to-hand combat skills in preparation for the duel. Tiana only tagged along because it was forbidden to set foot in a labyrinth alone, although Nick was fighting the shadow wolves by himself.

“That can’t be the normal way to kill them... You should defend against their first attack and then steadily wear them down,” Tiana said.

“I don’t want to hear about ‘normal’ from you,” Nick responded.

“Why?”

“Cause you can just find them with Magic Search and kill them with a preemptive strike. That makes life easy for the vanguard when we’re fighting weak monsters.”

“Hmm-hmm. That’s a good thing, isn’t it?” Tiana smiled boastfully.

“It feels safe, I’ll give you that. It’s made me rusty, though,” Nick explained.

“That doesn’t mean you have to train so recklessly. You’re killing monsters without your dagger and only knuckle guards to protect your hands. It’s dangerous.”

“Oh, come on. I’m kicking them, too.”

“Like that’s any better... Is Leon that strong? Do you really need

such intense preparation? You look ready to me.”

“It’s not his strength I’m worried about. Something just feels... off,” Nick answered vaguely.

“What do you mean?” Tiana asked.

“I don’t like to brag, but I believe I can beat anyone in a hand-to-hand fight.”

“Yeah.”

“But Leon manipulated me and created a two-on-one situation.”

“That’s not a fair fight.”

“That’s not the problem. I was convinced there was no one around us. There’s no way I was just caught off guard. It’s as if that mage realized his party member was in danger the moment I grabbed Leon’s legs and only then came running.”

“Oh, that’s what you’re worried about.”

“...Now that I think about it, something was off the first time I met Leon, too. He couldn’t have known I was kicked out of my party when I told Claudine, but he showed up as soon as she dumped me. It’s like he immediately heard everything we said.”

“...So you’re saying there’s something you need to look out for, but you don’t know what it is,” Tiana summed up. Nick nodded in response, but she still looked confused. “And you think working on your hand-to-hand combat will help you solve this problem?”

“No, not really. I just wanted to put my body and brain to work.”

“You’re not using your head at all,” Tiana said exasperatedly.

“Karan and Zem are taking care of that, not me. I asked Zem to do some investigating. I might ask you for something, too,” Nick responded.

“If you have a plan, I guess I don’t mind helping out. Is there anything I can do right now?”

“I’ve warmed up, so I’m gonna go down to the lower floors for a bit. Keep watch up here.”

“You can be surprisingly muscle-brained... Be careful!”

Nick gave a casual wave and took off.

Nick descended to the third floor of the labyrinth. The monsters were the same shadow wolves that appeared on the first two floors. Aside from the boss, they were the only monster found in the cave. For a species with good night vision and people with the ability to sense monsters, this labyrinth was much easier than Goblin Forest.

The increase in obstacles differentiated this floor from the earlier two. Shadow Wolf Cave was a limestone cavern with a forest of stalactites and stone pillars. The stalactites didn’t grow beyond a certain length or block the path forward owing to the labyrinth’s ability to maintain its shape, but the size and quantity made them

perfect for the shadow wolves to lurk behind as they prepared to attack passing adventurers. The layout also became more complicated from the third floor down, making it easy to get lost.

“It really is tough to get around down here... Though I guess that makes for good practice, too,” Nick complained as he easily defeated the shadow wolves that attacked him. He remembered nearly crying when he came here for training in the past. Back then, he hadn’t handled this place nearly as well. “He just tossed me right in here...”

Argus, Nick’s mentor, wasn’t a bad instructor, but he was terrible at explaining things with words. Once he’d finished teaching him the ways of using a dagger, hand-to-hand combat, and sensing presences in the dark, he’d said, “Now put what you’ve learned to use. Come back once you feel you’ve killed enough monsters,” and set him loose in Shadow Wolf Cave. That was Nick’s first day at work as an adventurer.

“I didn’t even make it to the final floor.”

Nick had gotten injured on the third floor and given up. He was terrified that killing the shadow wolves wouldn’t be enough—he’d believed that if he couldn’t defeat the boss, too, Argus would abandon him. When he returned to the entrance, however, Argus told him, “Withdrawing does not mean failure,” and treated him to a meal.

The meal was roast chicken. He was pretty sure it was the most expensive item their inn at the time served. It wasn’t like they were staying at a trendy place known for its food; it was simply expensive because it was meat. Even now, he still remembered the taste.

“*Rawrf!*”

His trip down memory lane was cut short when three shadow wolves attacked. Two of them hunched low, and one charged in from the front and the other from behind. The third one jumped nimbly from boulder to boulder, likely planning to pounce after the other two.

“Hey, these shadow wolves aren’t bad.”

Nick ran toward the one in front of him and overtook it, then sprinted farther into the cave with the speed of a wolf. The shadow wolves pursued.

“Sweet.”

Nick’s victory was set in stone the moment the shadow wolves grouped together. He turned around abruptly and used a roundhouse kick to knock one of them aside.

“*Yipe?!!*”

His kick threw the monsters out of sync. This was a weakness of shadow wolves—they liked to lurk in the darkness and wait for the perfect time to attack, but if you avoided their initial deadly strike, they weren’t much of a threat. The starving stray dogs that prowled

Labyrinth City were scarier. Nick easily killed them one by one.

He took a moment to catch his breath, then got to work yanking out their fangs. The fangs weren't worth much individually, but they fetched a respectable price if you collected enough of them. Also, the labyrinth would use the fangs to birth new monsters if he left them. It wasn't just for money that adventurers collected as much as they could; it was also an important duty of theirs.

"This should net me a little extra money. Maybe I should buy Karan a gift....," Nick muttered. Just then, he felt a chill run down his spine.

Shadow Wolf Cave was a very quiet place. Bats and snakes and other animals that did not turn into monsters inhabited the cave as well, but they were gentle-mannered and didn't attack people. It was surprisingly safe, even peaceful, if you could just kill the shadow wolves. Left alone on the first floor, Tiana felt that peace keenly.

Without her magic lantern—a magical item that converted mana into light—she wouldn't have been able to see a thing. She could manage with Magic Search, but the darkness still created a peculiar environment.

"...This reminds me of my journey."

Tiana associated darkness with her trip to Labyrinth City after her engagement was annulled and she was banished from her home. Darkness had been her constant companion when she journeyed by carriage, relying only on the travel fare and the mage's equipment her family gave her. It was also a threat that prowled, waiting for the chance to strike.

She may have been dressed as a mage, but it was highly unusual for a girl of noble bearing to travel alone. She encountered many people who were distrustful of her and treated her with contempt, assuming she must have committed some grave sin to end up in her current predicament. People shouted vulgar words at her and offered countless unsavory invitations. Darkness was the easiest way to shut those people up. She often volunteered as a night guard for her carriage to call forth thunder and make insolent ruffians cower in fear. Even burly men would wet themselves when they saw a flash of Tiana's face in the dark.

She also met friendly people who looked at her without prejudice. Just like her, they always had some past that was difficult to talk about. While they never discussed the full story of what had happened to them, they would all talk abstractly to share the nature of their wounds and console each other. Without fail, the most meaningful conversations occurred on the darkest of nights. Darkness was her friend.

However, that didn't change how dangerous the dark was. Once, monsters wandered onto the highway in the middle of the night and attacked Tiana's carriage. She frantically cast Lightning Strike to burn the monsters to a crisp and accidentally set the surrounding trees on fire. She had to scramble to cast water spells to prevent burning the whole forest down. There were no combat-ready passengers such as adventurers or knights present, and she would never forget the fear she felt knowing that if she failed to kill the monsters, she and all the carriage passengers would die.

The darkness soothed her, threatened her, and forced her to grow. Tiana couldn't claim that it didn't scare her. That fear was part of human nature. She did wonder, however, if getting acquainted with the dark was proof of the freedom she had obtained.

"I am free, instructor. You never told me that freedom was this frightening," Tiana muttered self-deprecatingly. Despite her words, she felt no resentment toward him. "But...it seems to suit me."

She decided that if she ever saw her instructor again, she would air her grievances and then apologize as well. She had that nightmare the other day because she had never felt like facing her past. Realizing it would be best for her to do so at some point, she put her anxieties aside for now.

"What's taking him so long?"

Tiana was starting to get impatient. She had killed some time by being lost in her own thoughts, but she still had no idea what to do with herself. She had never been good at waiting around like this. Wandering in the dark didn't sound any more appealing, though.

"Might as well check..." Tiana lifted her staff and chanted, "*Magic Search*."

Magic Search was a spell that sensed the mana circulating in the air, enabling the caster to grasp the location of beings with strong mana, such as monsters or people blessed with magic. There were no beasts in the surrounding area. She directed her attention down where Nick went.

"...Huh?" Tiana sensed a presence too powerful for a shadow wolf. Now that she thought about it, Nick hadn't mentioned anything about the boss of this labyrinth. She hoped he didn't intend to kill it by himself. Actually, the boss shouldn't be a problem for him; she was sure he already knew everything about it. The biggest risk was the possibility of encountering a mutant species like the ogre they found in Goblin Forest.

"...I should investigate, just in case."

Tiana headed farther into the cave to follow Nick. When she reached the location where she sensed the strong mana, she found a shirtless guy and a werewolf engaged in a one-on-one fistfight.

“Dammit! You’re tougher than I expected...!”

“Gawrrl!”

For reasons Tiana didn’t understand, the werewolf was clenching its fists, making no attempt to bite Nick with its sharp fangs. Nick was no different—he was fighting with his fists as well, with his dagger still sheathed.

“Ptooeey.”

The werewolf spat saliva mixed with blood. They both took that as a sign to continue fighting.

The beast had the advantage in arm strength and variety of moves, but Nick used his excellent intuition to avoid any clean blows. He dodged well and landed accurate punches. It wasn’t easy, though—he missed on occasion, and the werewolf hit him a few times.

Tiana scanned the area and realized shadow wolves had gathered to howl in support of the werewolf.

“What’s going on here?” she muttered. Neither Nick nor the monsters took notice of her. They were all absorbed in the fight.

Nick and the werewolf continued to exchange blows until they finally seemed to slow down from exhaustion. The shadow wolves ceased their growling and crying and watched with bated breath, as if they could sense the end was near.

“...Hi-yah!”

A giant thud sounded as the werewolf’s body fell to the ground. Nick was the last one standing.

“What the heck are you doing?” Tiana asked.

“Oh, hey, Tiana. Sorry for taking so long,” Nick responded.

“Answer my question. What is that thing?”

“You mean this guy?” Nick pointed at the collapsed monster.

“What else?”

“It’s a mutant species... They’re even rarer than ogres. I think it’s called a shadow wolf commander. They’re like a shadow wolf that’s transformed into a werewolf. It really didn’t like getting punched.”

“Huh.”

“For some reason it started swinging its fists to provoke me... And before I knew it, we were in a fistfight.”

“Nick.”

“Y-yeah?”

“No matter how easy a labyrinth is, you can still get caught off guard. It’s careless to assume nothing can hurt you. What if it was baiting you so it could set the surrounding shadow wolves on you when you weren’t paying attention? That could have happened.”

“Sorry.”

“Sorry’ isn’t enough. You’re the veteran adventurer—I shouldn’t have to scold you like this.”

“You’re right. I won’t let it happen again.”

Tiana realized the shadow wolves had all quietly slipped away. They probably sensed they had no choice but to retreat after watching their leader get defeated and the victor get chewed out by a newcomer. She kept a lookout from the corner of her eye as she continued to reprimand Nick for his actions.

After giving Nick a piece of her mind, Tiana felt a bit better and let the fury drain out of her. It wasn’t until then that she realized how beaten up he was—he was covered in bruises and scrapes and drenched in sweat. She shoved a towel at him to hide her embarrassment.

“Take this. You’re soaked,” she said.

“Thanks,” Nick replied. He gladly used it to wipe his forehead.

“What happened to your clothes anyway?”

“I took off my jacket and shirt ’cause it’s hot in here.”

“Geez... What are you, ten years old? Sit down. I’ll fix you up. Make sure to have Zem look at you when we get back.”

“I know, I know.”

“Good.”

Nick sat down on a boulder, and Tiana produced herbs and bandages from her bag to stop his bleeding. Once she was done treating him, she handed him a flask almost as an afterthought.

“Thanks,” Nick said.

“Don’t mention it.”

“...I wonder if they’re still studying.”

“Do you mean Karan and Zem? I don’t think there’s any need to worry. Karan’s a hard worker.”

“She is, but...”

“What is it?”

“She’s naive. I worry about her a bit.”

“Well, it’s up to you as our leader to take care of her.”

“I don’t want her to rely on me too much. She needs to be able to support herself,” Nick said, before shrugging and starting to do some light stretching.

Tiana examined Nick’s body. He didn’t have the thick, muscular build of a typical warrior, but he was toned and lean with little fat. He had a lot of scars. He wasn’t blessed with height, but the results of his intensive training and adventuring were obvious.

She realized she was staring rudely and quickly looked away. Nick wiped his sweat and put his shirt and jacket back on. He was probably starting to feel a little cold now that the heat from battle had left him. His heavy breathing had steadied as well.

“So, Nick.”

“What?”

“Do you still have feelings for Claudine?”

“Are you crazy?! Hell no! She pisses me off!”

“I figured.”

“How could I still like her after the way she scammed me? I wish I could erase my memories of dating her... Do you feel differently about your ex, Tiana?”

Tiana had gone through a similar experience. The boy she loved teamed up with another girl and ruined her life. Thinking about it made her blood boil.

“Hmm... I’m definitely mad. I have no idea what I’d do if I found myself face-to-face with him again.” Tiana’s eyes were full of anger, but there was no sign of a deep-seated obsession. “But I’m not angry enough to want to erase the past or chase him to the ends of the earth and kill him.”

“That’s probably normal...though I guess it depends on the person.”

“Yeah.”

Tiana didn’t want to criticize another person for making revenge their life’s mission; it just wasn’t for her. As for whether that was normal, she had no idea.

“But I’ll never forgive him for what he did to me. He didn’t just ruin my life but my instructor’s as well. I definitely want to make him regret that one day, but I don’t really regret loving him. Although...”

“Yeah?”

“I always need something to immerse myself in, whether it’s romance, hobbies, or adventuring. If I had graduated and married Alex—that’s my ex’s name—I probably would’ve lost my mind from boredom and run away.”

“I can see that. You’re definitely not the type who could handle marrying young,” Nick commented with a wry smile.

Tiana glared at him dangerously. “Watch your mouth.”

“What? I only echoed what you said!”

“That’s where you’re supposed to make me feel better by saying, ‘That’s not true.’ Anyway, getting serious...”

“Wh-what?”

“I can’t stand your ex-girlfriend. I hate that giant tiger and his obnoxious grin, too. That’s why I gave them a piece of my mind. It wasn’t for you. I just said what I wanted to say.”

“You know, I actually respect how blunt you can be.”

“Why, thank you.”

“I’m sure I’d want to punch your ex if I saw him, too.”

“He has a very punchable face. So...”

“What?”

“Make sure you do everything you want to do.”

“What do you mean?”

“We all have things we want to do, whether it’s slugging nasty people, gambling, or going to idol concerts, but I’m talking about the bigger picture. Do you have anything you want to do in life?”

“You mean like a dream or a goal?”

Tiana held up a finger and nodded. “Yeah, a dream. That’s the perfect word.”

“Nothing really comes to mind... What about you, Tiana?”

“Me? Hmm...” She nearly answered that she wanted to apply herself to studying magic but hesitated after thinking it was too vague.

“Tiana?” Nick pressed.

“I want to become a sage,” Tiana said. That was a goal she hadn’t been conscious of until just now.

“A sage?”

“It’s a title given to those who are recognized by the Society of Mages as both a mage and a scholar.”

“Wow... So is that the mage version of an S-rank adventurer?”

“Yeah, you could say that. It’s not like you receive a salary from the kingdom, though. It’s more of a prestige thing. The title will let you get a job at any research institution you want... You could even start your own research facility and watch people come in droves to join you. Sages even gain the right to meet with royalty and nobility directly. There are many researchers and mages who strive for it.”

This had never been Tiana’s goal—it was her instructor’s. She’d been just an ordinary student before her life fell apart, and now she was an adventurer with no roots. Becoming a sage was too unrealistic to call a goal. To even be considered for the title, you had to perform a great public service like using magic to prevent a natural disaster or stop a horde of rampaging monsters, and also make a grand discovery worthy of recognition from the executives of the Society of Mages. Heroes of that caliber naturally didn’t come around too often. Tiana doubted there were even ten sages on the continent. But Nick didn’t know any of that.

“And you’re striving for that title now?” he asked blithely.

“Uh, yeah... I think I’ll start by writing a thesis in between my adventuring and gambling. There’s a slight chance the Society of Mages will approve it,” Tiana answered.

“You’re going to write a thesis?!”

“Y-yeah, I am. More mages than you’d think write theses.”

That wasn’t a lie. A lot of mages wrote papers as a hobby and got together at cafés and bars for what they called “research paper seminars,” where they made casual comments on each other’s work as they ate and drank. It was nothing serious, and the papers were of

much lower quality than those written by people working at schools or research facilities. There were rare precedents of unaffiliated mages writing an interesting thesis and getting recruited by an institution, so it was technically possible she could get acknowledged by the Society of Mages. She just didn't have to mention how unrealistic it was.

Nick, knowing none of that, was genuinely impressed. "A thesis... You're so smart. I'd have a better chance of growing wings and learning to fly than doing something like that," he said.

Before any guilt showed on her face, Tiana hurriedly changed the subject. "G-give yourself some credit. There's a chance you could become an S-rank adventurer someday. You know adventurers are given peerage once they reach A rank, right? You could even become a noble."

"Of course I know that. A-rank and S-rank adventurers are like celebrities in Labyrinth City. And more importantly...they're heroes."

"Heroes?"

"Normally they're just a better version of C-rank or D-rank adventurers, thanks to their crazy strength. But whenever a miasma spike causes monsters to spill out of a labyrinth, A-rank and S-rank adventurers take charge and exterminate them. They also catch dangerous wanted criminals. Everyone in Labyrinth City respects them like heroes."

"You sure know a lot about them... Do you want to reach that rank one day?" Tiana asked.

Nick shook his head sadly. "No, I've never really wanted that for myself. But..."

"Yeah?"

"I did wanna improve the rank of my old party. All my party members were skilled warriors, so it was definitely achievable. They were the kinda people who could brute-force their way through a labyrinth that wasn't supposed to be possible without a mage."

"Hmm."

"We could've made A rank if we'd just done everything we needed to do. Even S rank was a possibility. The party was that strong. I always wanted our leader to gain the recognition he deserved."

Nick's voice was soft, unlike his usual coarse manner of speech. Tiana listened without interrupting.

"My parents were peddlers, and we were always moving from town to town. My earliest memories are of us traveling all around the country, visiting all kinds of places. That came to an end when thieves attacked us and killed both of my parents. Argus—the leader of Combat Masters—was the one who killed the thieves and saved me. He took me in, this hopeless kid, and taught me how to be an adventurer and how to fight."

“Really...”

“I wanted to return the favor. I thought I could help compensate for what Combat Masters lacked. I think I succeeded in that, actually. But...” Nick couldn’t bring himself to continue.

“...Do you regret it?” Tiana asked.

“Regret what?”

“Working hard for Argus. Would you rather have done nothing?”

“Hmm...I don’t know.” He hesitated, then shook his head. “Argus didn’t actually kick me out ’cause I was a nuisance. Looking back, I think he was doing me a favor. My ambitions differed from the rest of the party. I see that clearly now after having formed the Survivors.”

“That must feel good.”

“I might’ve just been trying to raise our rank for my own satisfaction. That said, I don’t know what would’ve happened if I hadn’t done anything. I can only speculate as to the reason I was kicked out, but I think working to help others was something I needed to do.”

“Then are you not mad about being framed for theft?”

“No, that’s a whole other matter.” With a serious expression, Nick waved his hand. “I definitely wanna get back at them for that. I’m looking forward to the day they regret it,” he said with a laugh.

Tiana smiled in response. “Good. I think it’s important for you to do that. You can show them that you were right all along once you reach A or S rank. It would be really fun to see you as a hero of the city.”

“...That would feel really good.”

“That’s the spirit.”

“I’m gonna work you to the bone, too. You’d better be ready.”

“Okay, okay. Don’t forget that you’re the star of this duel, though. Make sure you’re prepared.”

Nick looked away and scratched his head awkwardly, looking like she had struck a nerve. Tiana couldn’t help but smile as she watched him.

After finishing their trek into Shadow Wolf Cave, Nick got to work on making his final preparations for the duel. He avoided any heavy training that would tire him, instead choosing to keep himself ready physically with some light exercise that could be performed in a park without leaving the city. He wanted to be in the best condition possible.

Early one day, Nick was sitting down on a park bench after running five kilometers before the morning mist even cleared. He heard a familiar voice from behind him.

“Hey. Long time no see.”

Nick turned around, surprised. "H-hey," he said.

"...What's with the blank look? Have you forgotten me?"

"Course I haven't forgotten you." Nick scowled, and the girl giggled.

She had long, navy blue hair and a kind face. She was wearing a light hemp shirt and hemp capri pants. This wasn't how Nick was used to seeing her—he associated her with the flashy yet casual dresses he saw her wear onstage.

The girl was Agate, Nick's favorite idol.

"Were you jogging, too?" Nick asked.

"Yep. There's nothing more important than health, after all. I have a pretty big job coming up, too," Agate answered.

She had a show approaching. As a huge fan of hers, Nick had naturally memorized her concert schedule. He wanted to pepper her with questions about her job, but right now they weren't fan and idol—they were simply acquaintances who occasionally ran into each other and said hello. Nick didn't want to ruin that relationship, and Agate seemed aware of that.

"Are you working out, too?" she asked.

"I have a fairly tough job coming up," Nick answered.

"Fairly? Where's the ambition?"

"Hey, don't compare me to yourself. Any job I do is gonna feel small next to your live shows."

There weren't many people who could fill a park or town hall like an idol could. Nick meant that as a compliment.

"I guess so..."

Agate's expression turned glum, and she seemed to stare off into the distance. She looked tired.

"Is something bothering you?" Nick asked.

"Yeah, kind of..." Agate said before hesitating and scratching her cheek. It was obvious from her gesture that she was more than "kind of" worried. She fell silent for a bit, then suddenly met Nick's eyes and continued talking. "I really shouldn't say this, so please ignore it."

"Wh-what is it?"

"I think I might've messed up when we first met."

"How so?"

"I don't know if I should've given you that ticket."

"Huh? I was grateful for that."

"I know... But there are some people who become idol fans and spend so much money buying tickets and merchandise that they end up in debt. Even telling them to support me within reasonable means just encourages them to splurge even more obsessively. If you had been that type of fan, you would've ended up in an even worse situation."

“Oh... Yeah, some fans just can’t help themselves.”

During his time as an idol groupie, Nick had noticed other people who lived just as irresponsibly as him, or worse. Agate and the talent agency she worked for didn’t perform any wicked practices to exploit their fans financially, but there were agencies that had no such qualms. Nick had gone pale in the face after hearing the debts of some of those idol fans. That could have been his fate if Agate had been as unscrupulous. A chill ran down his spine at the thought.

“I wonder what differentiates people who can’t control themselves and people who can,” Agate said.

“Good question...,” Nick responded.

There were two types of people: those who gave in to their desires and those who could resist them. Nick didn’t know what differentiated the two. He found it a little strange he didn’t wind up in the former category himself. He felt the same about the other Survivors, especially Tiana—how was she able to keep herself from taking a loan when she lost so much money gambling that she couldn’t pay rent? Nick thought his invitation to form a party was a major factor, but it still couldn’t have been easy for her.

“I think all people are stubborn. We don’t know when to give up,” Nick said.

“Yeah,” Agate agreed.

“This isn’t something I like to tell people about, but I was scammed by a woman. She tricked me into lending her money and then tossed me to the curb when she had no more use for me.”

“Oh no... That must’ve been heartbreaking.”

“That’s why I was so pissed when we first met. I knew I couldn’t remain like that, but I wasn’t sure which path to take.”

“What do you mean?”

“To give an extreme example...I could’ve insisted on getting revenge against my ex-girlfriend and become a fraudster or a murderer myself.”

“But you didn’t...right?” Agate asked timidly. Nick’s dark tone had frightened her a bit.

“Of course not. I’m making an honest living as an adventurer. I think I was able to avoid a life of crime because I didn’t give up on working a respectable job. I didn’t think about it too hard at the time, but I was at a fork in the road in my life.”

“So you’re saying it was by chance you didn’t become a fraudster or a murderer? What am I to make of that...?” Agate said, sounding disappointed.

“I was in a dark place. Honestly, if my situation had been even slightly different, I might’ve made a different choice.”

Nick wondered if the ability to make moral choices when the

chips were down was an innate characteristic that only some people were born with. If so, then what a cruel world they lived in. That would mean anyone who made an immoral decision in such a situation was bad by nature. He didn't have the confidence to say he could make a moral choice again if he ended up in another life crisis, and he lived in constant fear that his sheep's clothing would get torn off to reveal a wolf underneath.

When he thought about that, he couldn't thank Agate enough for approaching him when he was sitting in the park, drenched by the rain. Before he could find the words to convey his gratitude to her, she spoke up.

"...A friend of mine is in a dark place, too."

"What, were they scammed by a lover, too?"

"No... At least, I'd like to think so."

"You'd like to think so? What does that mean?" Nick asked, but Agate continued without answering.

"Basically, one of my friends is being deceived by another friend. He's even being tricked into giving them money. I'm worried about him, but he won't listen to me. He's lost all confidence in himself."

"Hmm..."

"I wish I had some way to open his eyes... But I can't think of anything," she said with a weak laugh.

"Aren't you forgetting something?" Nick asked, as if he couldn't believe he even had to say it.

"Huh?" Agate responded, scrunching her face. "Why are you looking at me like that?!"

"You said it yourself, remember? It's an idol's job to make people happy and give them courage."

"...Oh." Agate blushed a deep shade of red, then hurried to make an excuse for herself. "I—I did say that, but I like to keep my private and professional lives separate..."

"Sure, but is there anything you're better at than cheering people up?" Nick asked innocently.

Agate was stumped by the question, and she glared at him after seeming to come to a decision. "I'm *so sorry* that being an idol is all I'm good for!" she fumed.

"I—I think your talent as an idol is impressive enough on its own... I could've worded that better, though. Sorry."

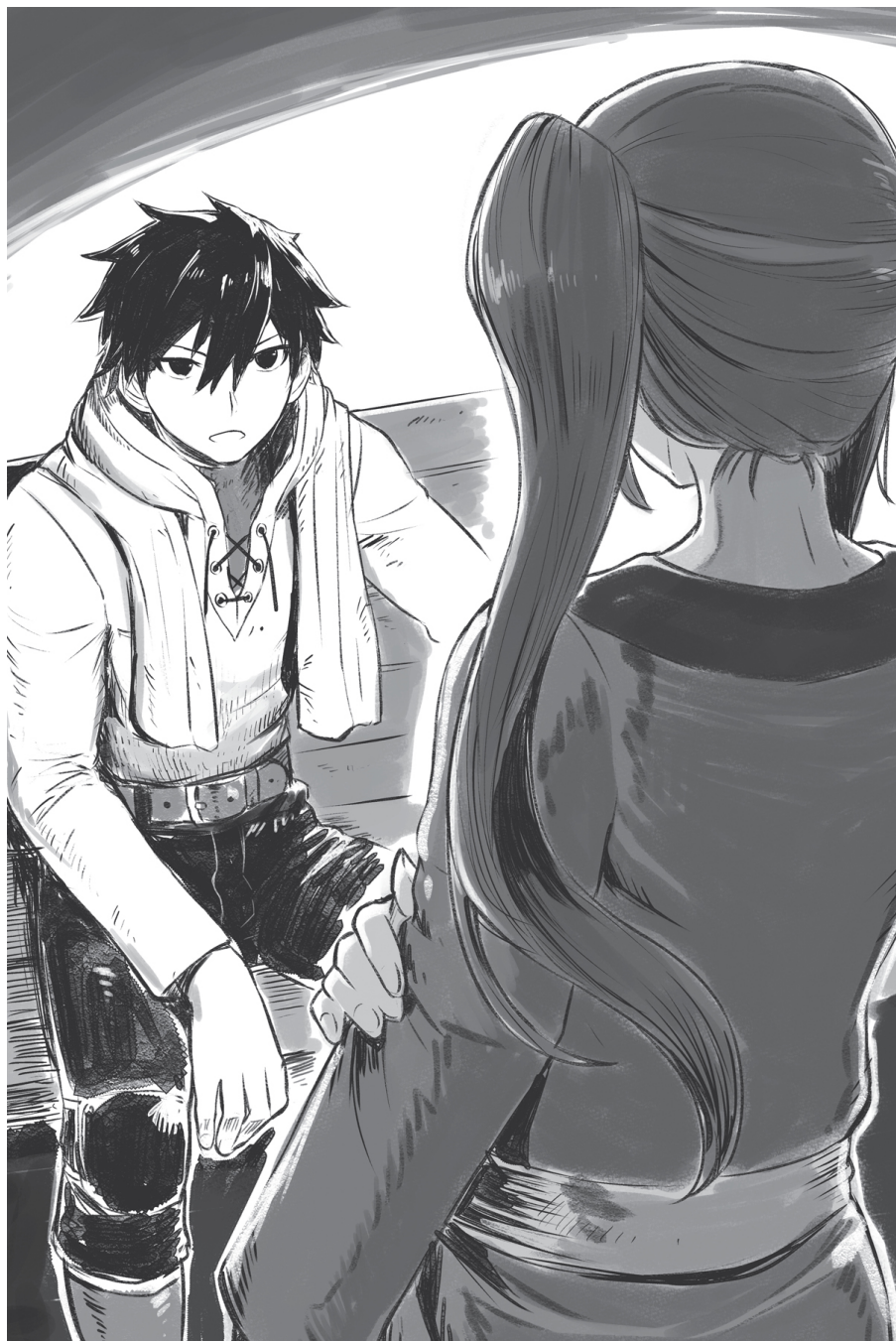
"I'm not mad at you! I'm mad at myself for not noticing it!" Agate shouted, before taking a deep breath to calm herself down. "What am I yelling for?"

"Don't ask me."

"I feel better, though. Thank you."

"N-no problem," Nick said, confused. All he'd done was state the

obvious. It seemed like Agate had solved her problem herself while he was busy trying to figure out how to thank her. He didn't feel like he had done anything.



“All right, see you later!” Agate said cheerfully, leaving with a spring in her step and no further explanation.

“Geez, she can be a real handful... Guess I should get back to it.”

Nick decided to go on another run. He loosened his ankles and knees a bit, then took off.

Nightlife Gossip



A surprising amount of information about other adventurers could be obtained in the red-light district. Adventuring was an unstable job. You could make a great amount of money one day and then nothing at all the next. One moment of carelessness could lead to your death as well. Because of this, many male adventurers visited nightlife establishments to forget the precariousness of their job, often losing all the money they'd made that day and spilling secrets about other adventurers in the process. Zem understood the habits of these men well. After all, he was one of them.

"I see... That is good to know."

"Geez, you'd never believe how many men have been fooled by that airhead."

Zem was at Spring Fairy, his favorite hostess club. He visited to carry out the job Nick asked him for, and he was being served by a hostess named Melissa, with whom he had become acquainted. Karan—who was still studying—looked at him with disbelief when he stated he was going out despite the duel they needed to prepare for. Still he assured her it was for serious business as he left the inn.

"You should stay away from Claudine, okay, Zem? She tricks men into giving her money and uses her burly party members as bodyguards."

What Nick had asked Zem to do was investigate Claudine's behavior. If she would go so far as to invite men to her favorite café and trick them into thinking they had a serious relationship, word of her wrongdoings may have spread farther than they thought. With that assumption in mind, Zem made a plan to ask questions at a number of establishments. All it took was one visit to his favorite hostess bar, however, for information about Claudine to tumble out

like fruit from a basket with a hole in it.

“Oh my. There are some truly terrible people in the world,” Zem said. His voice was grave, but inside he was almost giddy.

“I know, right? People like her ruin the credibility of safe establishments like ours. It’s a serious problem,” Melissa complained.

“Do you know any victims of hers?”

“Hmm... Promise me you won’t tell anyone. An adventurer who comes here every weekend told me he was deceived by her. Also...”

“Yes?”

“Haah, all this talking is making me so thirsty.”

“Please, drink whatever you like. I do not mind.”

“Thank you so much! Anyway, I know of four people. Lean in.”

“...Hmm.”

Zem leaned in so Melissa could whisper the names and descriptions of four victims. He chuckled quietly at the abundance of helpful information.

“Did any of those cases go to court or develop into a duel?” Zem asked.

“I’ve heard of multiple duels, but that Leon guy always wins. I hear he’s *super* strong,” Melissa answered.

“Interesting...”

“Are you gonna, like, punish Claudine or something?”

“Whatever do you mean by that?”

“Aw, don’t play dumb... Just, be careful, okay? Leon really is strong. There’s something weird about that Begg guy, too.”

“These three are more famous than I would have thought.”

“They apparently have some kind of secret trick or something. I don’t know what it is, though.”

“A secret trick?”

“Yeah. One of the victims I know is a D-rank adventurer. He’s way too tough to go down easy in a fight. He said that Leon has *crazy* good intuition. Like he has eyes in the back of his head.”

“Am I correct in assuming the duels were not all simple fistfights?”

“Oh yeah, if the victim is an adventurer, Leon challenges them to some weird test thing. But he always wins that, too. Why does he have to be smart *and* strong? It’s not fair. He’s a really good gambler, too, and he spends generously on women. He’s made a lot of enemies, though, so the only girls who go anywhere near him are, like, total idiots.”

“Huh...”

“That’s all I know about them. If you want to know more, ask the victims directly. They’re all really sensitive, though, so try not to hurt their feelings,” Melissa cautioned.

Zem gave her a reassuring smile. “Do not worry. I am a former priest. It is the ‘former’ that is important—men tend to open up to me when I tell them of my nightlife failures,” he said.

“You’re a naughty man. I’ll bet you’re more reliable than the Sun Knights, though,” she teased with a smile. She refilled Zem’s cup with alcohol, and he gulped it down with relish.

“The Sun Knights... They maintain order in this city, correct?”

“Yep. But no one really likes them. They can be kinda arrogant and overbearing... Oh yeah, there’s a rumor saying they’re trying to arrest Leon. I don’t know if it’s true.”

“Good to know...”

“I can’t tell you about it, though. I don’t want the Sun Knights knocking on our door.”

“Never fear. Thank you very much for the information.”

Zem was just about to change the topic and enjoy some drinking when someone new entered the conversation.

“Are you talking about Leon? I know him. He tricked the owner of the bar I used to work at,” said a young, red-haired hostess who’d just emerged from the back.

“My condolences to the owner... Would you like to share a drink?” Zem asked, motioning toward a seat.

The girl happily sat down. “Oh, are you sure?” she asked, already cheerfully pouring the drinks. That was rather shrewd of her, but Zem didn’t mind—straightforward girls like her were actually just his type.

“Oh, this is Rose. She was hired just last week,” Melissa said.

“Nice to meet you. Are you the Zem I’ve heard so much about?” Rose asked.

“It is a pleasure to meet you as well. So you all talk about me when I’m not here?” Zem replied.

“Well...”

“Hmm-hmm, I hope the rumors about me are positive.”

Zem was becoming a bit of a celebrity in the local red-light district. His healing and medical knowledge were valued greatly in this line of work, and women often asked him for treatment. They were also able to relax as they served him because he was used to the nightlife and never fixated on one hostess for too long. This ability to get women to drop their guard made gathering information easy for him.

“To our new friendship,” Zem said, and the two of them clinked their glasses together and drank.

Just when Zem was about to ask Rose a question, she assertively broke the ice first. She didn’t so much start a conversation as rant about her previous job.

“Donny is such an asshole... He’s the owner of the bar I used to

work at. He has a lot of nerve for such an average chef. He was always grumbling to himself about how ‘no one understands good food’ when customer traffic was slow. Like that was going to fix anything,” Rose complained.

“The restaurant business can be tough,” Zem remarked.

“A little PR would’ve helped, but he always said angrily that he wanted to ‘let his food do the talking’ and did nothing at all to attract customers. That’s when Leon showed up.”

“Did he invite Donny out to go gambling?”

“First, Leon praised him to high heaven. Anyone watching could’ve seen the guy was buttering him up, but it put Donny in a great mood. That’s when Leon invited him to go gambling. He’s been getting swindled like an idiot ever since.”

“Poor guy.”

“Don’t feel bad for him. He did this to himself. He tried to take the money he lost out of *our* salaries. Like I said, he’s an asshole.”

“I cannot defend that,” Zem said with a strained smile, and Rose giggled.

“Ah-ha-ha, even the former priest has abandoned him!” she exclaimed.

“Thank you for sharing that, Rose... Do you mind if I ask for a small favor?”

“Huh.” Rose froze. She was still sober enough to guess what he was going to say. “Are you gonna ask me to take you to Sparrow Port and introduce you to Donny?”

“Oh, is that the name of the bar? Yes, I would like you to take me there,” Zem responded.

“That would be really awkward for me... I quit because he refused to pay me. I just gave up and left.”

“No, I am not asking you to arrange a direct meeting with him. It would be more than enough if you could lead me to the bar and tell me more about him and Leon on the way.”

“Oh, is that all? ...Well, I would like to see that jerk squirm.”

Rose glanced at Melissa for permission. While Zem was a regular customer here, he hadn’t tied himself to a specific woman. That created a bit of tension whenever he invited a woman out from the club.

“Eh, I don’t see a problem with doing Zem a favor,” Melissa answered.

Rose looked relieved. Going on a date with Zem outside the club could earn her some bragging rights, but she didn’t want to attract needless jealousy. Sensing that, Melissa gave her permission while emphasizing that she was “doing him a favor.”

“How about we head there tomorrow? I will treat you to a meal as

well. At a different bar, of course,” Zem said.

The next day, Zem and Rose approached the bar called Sparrow Port. Zem knew immediately it was the restaurant she had told him about.

“This location is less than ideal,” he observed.

The bar was slightly removed from the main street, making it a tricky place from which to attract customers. All the nearby restaurants and cafés showed signs of wear from age, but they were full of life on the inside. Zem was sure that each one had plenty of regular customers. All except for Sparrow Port.

“Right? It was actually pretty popular until recently, but now it’s a shadow of its former self,” Rose said.

“It was? Was there some reason for its popularity?”

“Another one of the part-timers was an incredible singer. She attracted a lot of customers, and the place became famous as a karaoke snack bar. There was a rumor that she might be scouted as an idol.”

“An idol, huh. I have a friend who is obsessed with them. He even buys coats and magic glow sticks.”

“He sounds like a hardcore fan.”

“He would be happy to know there is a future idol working here.”

“Oh, I don’t think she helps out here anymore, unfortunately.”

“That is too bad. Did she quit?”

“She kinda just stopped showing up. I don’t know if she quit, or was fired, or what... Though I think the owner got his panties in a twist about his bar becoming famous for singing instead of his food.”

“...He got jealous.”

“His sales declined fast once he lost his little songstress, though,” Rose said, shrugging. The bar’s door opened just then. “Shoot! Hide!” She hid behind some boxes and tugged at Zem’s sleeve to get him to follow. “Oh, she hasn’t broken up with him. Man...”

A girl with navy blue hair left the bar and trudged away. She looked depressed. Rose sighed as she watched from their hiding spot.

“Rose. Is that girl—?” Zem began, and Rose answered before he could finish.

“Yeah, she’s the singer. She must’ve made up with Donny. She looked really down, though...”

A lively conversation between two men was audible through the open door of the bar; the girl had probably left to get away from them. One of them sounded intensely annoyed.

“Girls who don’t understand the value of a man are worthless, am I right, Leon?”

“Don’t worry, she’ll come around. Let’s get to the gamblin’ parlor. Everyone’s waitin’ for us. You’ll get back what you’ve lost this time.”

“Hell yeah I will.”

The two men turned off the lights in the bar and stepped outside. They locked the door and headed down a back alley even farther from the main street. Unlike the girl, they appeared cheerful as they walked away.

“It does not appear he intends to reopen today,” Zem remarked.

“...Apparently not,” Rose agreed.

“I wonder where they intend to go.”

“Didn’t you hear them? They’re going gambling.”

“Yes, but I do not believe there is a gambling parlor that way...”

“One was built over there recently. It’s unlicensed, as I’m sure you could guess.”

A license was needed to operate a gambling parlor in Teran. The inspection process to obtain one was very strict, mainly to protect the vested interests of certain high-ranking nobles and wealthy merchants. Businesspeople trying to enter the Labyrinth City marketplace had no chance of getting approved. No matter how much the city tried to restrict such unlicensed parlors and other forms of illegal gambling, however, they still sprang up like weeds.

“...I highly doubt a place like that would let you walk away with a profit. Though I suppose the same could be said of licensed casinos,” Zem said.

“They let you win a little and then yank it all back in the end. They don’t rob you blind, though—they make sure to leave you enough money to live on. That’s why Donny is convinced that Leon is a good guy,” Rose explained, her voice shaking with contempt. She was staring at the bar rather than the alley the men had walked down.

Zem thought the bar looked desolate, and not just because it was dark and empty. There was nothing written on the blackboard by the entrance that would usually be used for the menu. The boxes they were hiding behind had likely been left out and forgotten. They contained trash, but none of them smelled like rotten kitchen waste. This was proof of laziness rather than sanitary practice—it meant the owner had no intention of running a proper restaurant and only bought nonperishable ingredients.

“It might be surprising to hear me say this, but this place wasn’t so bad when it opened. Donny was never a great chef, but he worked really hard in the beginning. The girl who just left? She wasn’t always that sad, either. She had fun singing for the customers,” Rose said.

“...Is that so?”

“I shouldn’t have come. I thought Donny was an annoying prick when I worked there, but seeing this place now that I’ve quit... It’s so pathetic, I can’t even gloat. No one deserves this.”

“Sorry for making you see this, Rose. It must be unpleasant for

you.”

“It’s not your fault, Zem. It’s on me for bringing you here. Sorry.” Rose took a deep breath to calm herself. She seemed to have gotten worked up for reasons she herself didn’t understand. “I get so angry when I think about how easily I could’ve been exploited just like him. All it would take is one major stumble in my life. There’s no recovery once you fall apart like that, and there are always awful people like that tigerian waiting to take advantage of others.”

Zem was about to say something, but then he stopped. There was real fear in Rose’s voice. Words were not the way to dispel that.

“Wh-what is it...?”

Zem gently patted her on the shoulders, like a parent soothing a child. “That must have been frightening,” he said.

“N-no, I’m not scared...”

“I am an adventurer. I cannot save the owner of that bar, nor can I return the bar to how it used to be.”

“...Nobody could do that. You can’t turn back time.”

“No, I can’t. But what I can do is make a crook pay for exploiting a vulnerable person. That is why I asked you to bring me here.”

Rose looked taken aback. She stared at him unblinkingly for a few seconds, then burst out laughing.

“What are you talking about? All we did was loiter outside the bar. Are you sure this wasn’t just an excuse to take me on a date outside the club because you thought I was pretty?”

“I cannot deny the possibility.”

Rose giggled and gave him a teasing smile. The trembling in her voice had subsided.

Bare-Knuckle Math



The day of the duel arrived in a flash. Nick and his party members headed for the site of the duel, having prepared as much as they could. It was being held on the roof of the Fishermen Adventurers Guild building, where two different setups had been readied.

The first was simply a white square drawn on the floor to designate the area for the boxing match. There was no penalty for going out of bounds, but if you did so, the witness and the spectators would push you back inside the square. You were not allowed to run away until the duel was decided—it was a barbaric rule, but the white lines were there to enforce it.

The participants were waiting at either end of the square.

“What a surprise. I’m impressed you actually showed up, Nick.”

“I could say the same to you.”

Nick and Leon faced each other, apparently ready to come to blows at any moment. Weapons were forbidden in this duel. Shirts and shoes were forbidden as well, and armor went without saying. They both stood there shirtless and eager to go.

“Kick his ass!”

“Leon, don’t let that loser get a big head!”

“Rip that pussycat’s tail off, Nick!”

The adventurers who found Nick’s odd behavior grating rooted for Leon, and the people who knew of Leon’s crimes cheered for Nick. Excitement was high for the duel.

Two more participants wore sullen expressions and stood in great contrast to the menacing attitudes of Nick and Leon. They were positioned outside the white lines on either end of the square, sitting at desks turned to face each other. Both of them were women.

“Come on, can we get this started already? Aren’t you sick of

waiting, too?"

"Shut up."

One was a beautiful girl with soft, blond hair. It was Claudine, tugging idly on her hair. The other was Karan. She was ignoring Claudine and concentrating with her eyes closed, going over everything she had learned in the crash course she had received over the past week.

"...You're taking this way too seriously. This is going to be so boring," Claudine complained.

"Stop trying to provoke me. It's almost time. We're starting with the guys," Vilma announced for the crowd to hear.

The sun was painfully bright in the clear blue sky. Nick and Leon's shadows were plain to see on the rooftop floor, one a good deal larger than the other. Nick was a head shorter than Leon, a height difference that could create an overwhelming disadvantage in a fight. Very few of the onlooking adventurers thought Nick had a chance.

"Spells, weapons, and attacks aiming for the eyes are forbidden. The duel ends upon a ten count for a downed participant, or a loss of consciousness, or a surrender. I hope this goes without saying, but no killing. Everything else is fair game," Vilma explained.

"Got it," Nick responded.

"Ready whenever," Leon said.

The two participants glared at each other.

"...Begin!" Vilma called, and Nick immediately rushed toward Leon, throwing a lightning-quick hook.

"Whoa! That was a close one!" Leon dodged by stepping back the moment Nick swung his fist, as if he had seen the move coming.

"...Are you just gonna stand there?" Nick asked.

"What's the rush? We're just gettin' started," the tigerian jeered. He seemed completely unbothered by any of this.

Nick charged again and tried the same left hook, but Leon guarded with his bulky arms. He wasn't preventing Nick from getting a clean hit because of any great strength advantage; he was simply putting all his effort into defense without even thinking of attacking.

"...Tch."

Nick took another determined step forward and swung his fists again and again. Leon raised his arms in response, protecting himself from injury. When Nick finally stopped punching, Leon aimed for his legs with a kick.

"Grk!" Nick took one step back to avoid it without difficulty.

"Hey, what's the matter? Can't handle a little kick?"

"Damn you..."

Nick heard a whistle. Just then, Leon aimed for his stomach with a roundhouse kick. Beastmen had slightly springier legs than humans.

Nick chose to block the kick with his arms instead of dodge and was knocked back a bit. He didn't stumble, but he was momentarily left open to attack.

Strangely, however, Leon didn't take advantage of it. Nick slowly moved forward and began to circle around him, confused.

"What, have you given up on attacking? You ain't gonna win that way," Leon taunted.

"And you won't win by just defending," Nick responded. He transitioned into an attack, getting low and aiming a kick for Leon's side.

"Yikes!" Leon yelled.

Nick's kick connected, creating a bruise that looked as if it had been left by a snake coiling around Leon's leg. "I thought this last time, but you have a real dirty fighting style..."

"At least I'm not a filthy crook like you," Nick fired back.

"Watch your mouth!" Leon shouted, swinging his fist at Nick as he darted around nimbly. He didn't try very hard, however; once he got Nick to back off, he quickly retreated to his corner.

Nick had no space to make use of his footwork with Leon encamped over there. If he tried to attack, Leon would just hold him back with careful punches. The tigerian was using his strength and speed effectively for defense rather than attacking.

"...I knew it," Nick said.

"What're you talkin' about?" Leon asked.

"You're just buying time, aren't you?"

Nick had just performed an experiment by changing his method of attacking, hoping to move the duel along. Leon, however, remained firm in his refusal to fight aggressively, and even retreated to observe him. He showed no signs of breaking his defensive stance.

"I don't have a clue what you mean."

Nick guessed that Leon intended to attack just enough so that the audience wouldn't catch on to him and then focus entirely on defense and evasion. He was just trying to get the duel to the next round.

"Geez, that werewolf was easier to deal with than you," Nick grumbled as he approached Leon again. This time he left his hands open and slid toward him slowly.

"The hell are you doin'..."

Nick made no move to attack as he inched toward him. He moved close enough for them to feel each other's breath. Tension increased between them. Leon was the first to burst.

"Hrah!" he yelled, punching Nick between his chest and stomach. It was a clean hit...or so it appeared.

"Got you," Nick said.

He took the hit intentionally and grabbed Leon's arm, wrapping

around it like a serpent and locking his elbow.

“Grk... You’re so freakin annoying... What are you, a snake?!” Leon fumed, having quickly lost control of the duel. He collapsed, but not before using his massive strength to twist his body and drag Nick down with him out of bounds.

“Ngh...!” Nick grunted.

Leon fell on top of Nick, crushing him with his weight. Attacks were forbidden out of bounds, but the tigerian had made it look like the result of getting tangled up and losing his balance.

“Let me go!” Leon shouted.

“Whew... Well played,” Nick said, getting up and glaring at him. Leon returned the glare with hate in his eyes.

“God dammit! Do you ever quit?!”

Their stalemate continued until Vilma rang the bell, signaling the end of the boxing round. The duel shifted to the first showdown between Karan and Claudine.

Karan’s expression didn’t change even after Nick’s first round ended. She kept her eyes closed and focused on reviewing everything she had learned over the past week.

Education wasn’t considered especially important in her dragonian village—or any rural village, for that matter. In cities with strong traces of the ancient civilization, such as Labyrinth City and the royal capital, however, knowledge was valued and shared among all people, and it was common practice to send children to school. This resulted in a sizable gap between the education levels of urban and rural populations.

As such, there were many people in Labyrinth City who were easily deceived, like Karan, and many people who sought to deceive others, like Claudine. There were some who reached out to help victims similar to Karan, but most kept their distance and did nothing to solve the issue. Others even saw getting scammed as some rite of passage for people from the countryside. That was why very few people actually tried to help the vulnerable. It was even rarer for people to scold a victim and tell them to study.

“For the love of... Are you sleeping?” Claudine asked.

“Shut up,” Karan snapped.

“...How rude. I was just trying to help. Country hicks like you aren’t cut out for Labyrinth City. You should tuck your tail between your legs and go home.”

Karan opened her eyes slightly to glare at Claudine for that insult. That was enough to scare her into shutting up. How could Nick have ever supported her financially?

“Why do you deceive people for a living?” Karan asked.

"Huh?" Claudine responded.

"Do you have nothing better to do with your time?"

"...Are you looking for a fight?"

"Whatever. It's not like I care," Karan said, turning away in a huff.

Claudine looked as if she wanted to walk over and slap her in the face.

"If you want to fight, save it for later," Vilma said, stepping between them. "The guys didn't end the duel, so you two are up."

"Okay," Karan responded.

"Got it," Claudine answered.

"You have five minutes, the same as the boxing round. You'll be given basic math problems to solve at first. A person of average intelligence should be able to get a perfect score. The problems will get harder with each round. Get ready... Begin!"

Karan and Claudine opened their test booklets at the same time. The first round consisted of elementary-level arithmetic problems.

Thank goodness..., Karan thought, relieved. It hadn't even been half a month since Nick and Zem began teaching her, but she had already learned so much. She was now able to handle math she had never understood before or had overlooked out of ignorance. This test was a chance to prove how far she had come. She even forgot her animosity for Claudine as her pen raced across the page.

"...Time's up!"

Five minutes passed in no time. Karan and Claudine had written the exact same answers. After both contests ended in a draw, the duel moved on to the next boxing round between Nick and Leon.

The stalemate continued for three rounds. It was in the fourth round that one party began to pull ahead.

"That's a ninety for Karan, and a one hundred for Claudine," Vilma announced calmly.

A difference of ten or greater between scores on the math test resulted in a handicap in the boxing match. The teammate of the person with the higher score was awarded a free punch that their opponent was not allowed to block. Karan clenched her teeth in frustration.

"You're already struggling? This is going to get ugly fast," Claudine gloated.

Nick and Leon approached each other in the boxing ring.

"Let's see, where should I punch you...?" Leon said.

"Get it over with," Nick snapped.

"With pleasure."

Leon faked like he was going to hit Nick in the head, then delivered a hook to his stomach.

“Ngh...”

“Shit... Are you really human?!” Leon cursed, despite being the one to throw the punch.

Nick barely made a sound. He knew a technique to momentarily brace his body and avoid getting hurt. He couldn't completely erase the pain, but he could make it look like he didn't feel it at all.

It wasn't Leon who Nick wanted to show he wasn't hurt.

“Karan!” he yelled.

“N-Nick...,” Karan responded.

“This guy's weak-ass punches can't hurt me. Just focus on your tests.”

He hoped that would encourage Karan, who looked as if she had just been punched herself.

“...Okay!”

Karan's face stiffened, and she closed her eyes again as if meditating.

“...You've got a big mouth,” Leon said.

“If you want me to shut up, do something about it,” Nick retorted.

“What are you running for, Leon?! Hit him!”

“Get him, Nick! Show him what he gets for not takin' you seriously!!”

The duel remained in a stalemate. It was now the sixth round. Claudine had bested Karan on the math test twice in a row, forcing Nick to take two free punches. Despite that, Leon still did not engage in the boxing rounds. Even the audience had realized he was just trying to prolong the fight. Every now and then he pretended that he meant to attack, just to create the impression that he was taking the duel seriously.

“Time's up!” Vilma declared.

Leon walked back to his corner after five more minutes of dodging Nick's punches. He paid the spectators' boos no heed.

The duel moved to Karan and Claudine once more. The tests were starting to become difficult for Karan and her limited math knowledge, meaning the Survivors' disadvantage was only going to grow the longer the duel continued. As realization spread through the audience, Tiana spoke up.

“Hey, can I make a suggestion?”

“What is it, mage?” Vilma asked.

“The name's Tiana... Can we go ahead and wrap this up?”

“What do you mean?”

“This duel is going to take *forever* if we keep it up in these little five-minute bursts. I'm sure you have plenty of problems left for the math rounds, too. You should combine the rest of the math tests and

wrap this up.”

“Hmm.”

Vilma began to think, and the spectators shouted in agreement with Tiana.

“She’s right! Get this over with!”

“How long are you gonna drag this out?!”

“Silence! It’s up to the participants to decide how to end the duel! Or do you all want to fight in their place?!” Vilma yelled angrily, and the crowd shut up instantly. “Combining the rest of the math tests will mean combining the handicaps as well. The teammate of the loser will have to take four free punches in a row.”

“That’s fine with me,” Tiana answered.

“...What do you think, Claudine?” Vilma asked.

“Huh? I approve, but...,” she replied, looking at Karan doubtfully. This clearly worked in Claudine’s favor. She hadn’t had a significant edge on the basic problems they’d started with, but the higher the difficulty, the more that advantage grew. There was no way she was going to lose in a battle of wits to a dumb dragonian. She also had a trick up her sleeve in case she needed it.

“What about you?” Vilma asked, looking at Karan.

“Bring it on,” Karan said without hesitation, crossing her arms.

“...All right. You have twenty minutes to solve as many problems as you can.” Vilma prepared the test booklets and dropped a thick stack of paper on each of their desks. “It will probably be impossible to get to them all. The most difficult problems require the knowledge of a graduating senior at an aristocratic school. Stay calm and answer as many as you can... You may begin,” she announced, ringing the bell.

“What the—?!”

Something shocking happened the moment the test began. There was a stir among the crowd, which was watching Karan. She had immediately begun solving the problems with ease, her hand racing across the pages with the speed of a tornado as she wrote out her work on the blank page given for computations and filled in the answers on the answer sheet. She flipped through the booklets vigorously, solving each problem in mere seconds.

Claudine’s eyes widened at the sight.

“Th-that’s impossible...”

Karan was intently focused as her pen raced smoothly across the pages. In a moment of hypocrisy, Claudine wondered angrily if Karan had cheated by obtaining the answers beforehand.

“Claudine! Keep your eyes off your opponent!” Vilma warned. Claudine hurriedly lowered her gaze to her own test. That did nothing

to reduce her panic.

“Grr... How...?”

Claudine knew dragonians were the dumbest of all rural peoples in the country. They were blessed with potentially the greatest physical attributes and mana of all beastmen, and many were held in high regard for their heroic service during the war against the demons. A good number of dragonians rested on the laurels of those natural gifts, however. Claudine, on the other hand, was an ordinary human. She was aware that she was relatively good-looking, but she wasn't as gorgeous as an idol. She was naturally clever, but she didn't have the strength of a man or the magical ability of a mage. She had no family and no fortune.

Her parents had been employees at a stagecoach company until they were fired for embezzlement. As soon as Claudine had realized they planned to sell her into slavery, she'd run for her life. She didn't have the natural gifts that other races such as dragonians could rely on to support themselves. She was painfully aware she had few skills to help her get by in the world.

That was why she was jealous—jealous of people with useful abilities and of those with talent. That was also why she'd turned to a life of crime. People without talent had no choice but to rely on crooked methods to stay afloat.

Claudine knew Nick was a capable adventurer. He didn't fully appreciate his own talents, but he was genuinely good at appraising items and treasure, and he was quick-witted as well. He lamented he wasn't strong enough, but the fact that he could keep up in Combat Masters without being a burden was proof he was no ordinary adventurer. He was much stronger than her, at least.

When he told her that he was kicked out of Combat Masters, she reacted the way she did because of jealousy. She took pleasure in the knowledge that he had fallen to the same level as her. Mocking him felt wonderful, as did the rush of superiority.

This was proof that all humans were made equal. No matter who you were, it was inevitable that the cruel world would crush you one day. She was positive Nick would fall into despair and become corrupted when she betrayed him. Then, once he was worn out and near death, she was going to show him some warmth and give back just a little of what she had stolen from him. She would teach him how to survive in this chaotic, corrupt city.

Instead, Nick's life went in the complete opposite direction than she'd expected. He recruited new companions and started to make a name for himself among the intermediate adventurers in the area. He even saved one of her victims from her schemes.

She could have stopped there. She could have just not bothered

with a person who was progressing forward in life and remained in her own little world, where no one could challenge her. A part of her knew that what she was doing was foolish, that she was in the wrong, but still, she wanted to get her revenge against Nick.

Claudine was planning on cheating that idiot merchant's son, then betraying Leon by skipping town, but she had even abandoned that in her desire to get back at Nick. The way Nick had teamed up with others to live an honest life just pissed her off so much. She wasn't sure why, but Leon—who must have picked up on the signs of her intended betrayal—joined her in her quest for revenge. Maybe he was also angry about the way Nick had turned his life around after hitting rock bottom without having to resort to a life of crime.

"I won't let this happen... There's no way I'm gonna lose to this idiot!" Claudine muttered.

Karan heard what she said, and she sighed. Apparently, she wasn't going to engage with her mockery. "Only true idiots resort to name calling," she said evenly. That was the final straw for Claudine. She was truly angry now.

"...Begg! It's time to use our trump card!"

"Got it. I've got the reference book and abacus ready."

"I'm gonna read you the problems. I'm counting on you."

Claudine stealthily filled the orb hidden in her pocket with mana.

She could have just stopped there. Karan sensed Claudine's mana and even felt pity for her, but Claudine didn't notice. She also didn't notice the other members of the Survivors had disappeared from the rooftop.

Claudine waited for Begg to respond and quietly pretended to work on the test. Telepathy allowed one to speak directly into another person's mind, so she shut her mouth tight to avoid accidentally speaking aloud. She was finding it increasingly hard not to click her tongue with impatience.

"...These problems are hard. I can't figure them out without referencing the book. I need to focus, so please be quiet."

"Make it quick."

Begg was convenient to have around. He used to be a mage of decent standing, but an indulgent, pleasure-seeking lifestyle had led him to fall into debt and eventually slavery. Leon bought him and made him a member of the Iron Tiger Troop.

He was surprisingly easygoing, given his past. Leon had the same rotten stink that she did, but she didn't sense that from Begg. He was just an unruly person with a free spirit. He never hesitated to take part in fraud if Leon said there would be a reward, and he gladly helped out with Claudine's schemes as well. As long as he could eat, drink,

and go out, he was happy.

Begg had the brains to comprehend a difficult book yet seemed totally oblivious to the anguish of human life. He was a lucky man in that sense. Claudine and Leon's jobs were easiest when he assisted, and they had no difficulty getting him to help even at times like this.

And this time, they asked him to help cheat on the math test with a little telepathic assistance. Telepathy orbs were incredibly useful magic items that allowed one to use the spell *Telepathy* and communicate from a distance without speaking aloud. Claudine was using it to feed Begg the math problems. He was hiding in a location close enough to the Fishermen Adventurers Guild for the spell to reach and using a reference book and magic abacus to leisurely solve the problems. The Iron Tiger Troop counted on this method to defeat even relatively intelligent opponents.

Claudine was fully aware of the danger of this strategy. This math test wasn't the only thing she used the telepathy orb for—she had also relied on it to successfully swindle a great many victims. She knew, however, that once she was exposed, all the idiots she had cheated would come at her with pitchforks in hand. That was why she'd tried to leave the Iron Tiger Troop. She was going to clear her accounts once she'd saved enough money. This would be the last time she'd ever use the telepathy orb to cheat someone, so she was going to make full use of it.

"Hey, Begg. Are they really that hard?" Claudine asked, thinking Begg may have gone silent owing to one of his bad habits. He tended to shut out the rest of the world when concentrating on something. He was especially likely to do so when deciphering texts about magic.

Begg didn't care what others thought of him; he was himself no matter who he spoke to. There was nothing unusual about this silence. Nothing to worry about at all. That was what Claudine told herself to calm her anxiety. Except the telepathy orbs would end up being pointless if he didn't give her the answers in time to write them down. She decided to reach out to him again with *Telepathy* to spur him on.

"I know they're difficult, but please try to get them done in time." The silence continued. It didn't seem like he was going to respond. "... Hey, are you listening to me? Begg!" Her anxiety was only growing worse. A voice snapped her back to the rooftop.

"What's going on, Claudine? You almost look like you're talking to someone who isn't there. Or are you trying to talk to someone, and they're not responding?"

"Wh-wha...?" Claudine's heart skipped a beat. She quickly shut her mouth and darted her eyes around to find the source of the voice. The person who'd spoken was Nick. He was glaring at her from the chair in his corner of the ring.

“Are you praying for help because the problems are too hard? Solve them yourself,” he taunted.

“No heckling, Nick!” Vilma warned, and Nick shrugged.

Claudine trembled, afraid for a moment that he had figured out their trick, but she pulled herself together. Few people knew about telepathy orbs. They were valuable items that couldn’t be found even on Labyrinth City’s black market. Nick wasn’t stupid, but she knew he didn’t know that much about magic items.

Everything’s fine. That was a coincidence. He might suspect I’m cheating somehow, but there’s no way he can find any proof... Claudine told herself. Unfortunately for her, the worst-case scenario was about to unfold.

Claudine was convinced no one would be able to prove they were cheating. The vast majority of people had never even heard of telepathy orbs. She thought they were going to get away with it...until she saw Begg being led onto the rooftop tied up with rope.

“Sorry, Claudine and Leon. I screwed up,” he apologized flippantly.

Tiana and Zem were standing on either side of him to prevent him from escaping. Claudine didn’t need more than a glance to know they were finished.

“Vilma. They used this to cheat,” Tiana said. She tossed an orb at the old woman.

“Is this...a telepathy orb?” Vilma asked.

“Good, you already know what it is.”

“That I do. These can be used to cheat at anything.”

Claudine sprang out of her seat and kicked her desk at Vilma, confident she could get away. There were a lot of people on the rooftop, but that would actually make escaping easier. She was going to grab the money she had stored in her hideout and leave the city right away. It was likely the Adventurers Guild wouldn’t immediately report her, fearing the intervention of the Sun Knights.

She formed the plan in her head in an instant, but she didn’t get to take a step before it all fell apart. A pair of hands grabbed her legs with frightening strength.

“Ahhhh!”

“You’re not going anywhere. The duel isn’t over.”

Karan, who should have still been working on her test, had snuck up behind her like a wild animal and grabbed her when she tried to run. The dragonian lifted her up and dangled her in the air.

“I don’t give a crap about the duel! You...you were just pretending to solve the problems, weren’t you?!” Claudine protested angrily.

Karan responded with a wicked grin. “At least I didn’t break the

rules like you,” she said.

“Shut up! Let me go!”

“Let you go, huh? Is that really what you want?”

Karan lifted Claudine even higher. Anticipating what she was going to do next, Claudine shook her head in a panic.

“N-no, don’t! I give up! You win!” she shouted. She could end up seriously hurt if Karan dropped her or slammed her into the ground from that height. She didn’t expect the angry dragonian to be gentle with her.

“I know you’ll run if I let you go. I can’t trust you,” Karan said.

“I—I won’t run, I promise!”

“Fine. Behave yourself.”

Karan tossed Claudine down onto the roof, knocking her out with a pitiful gasp.

Anger spread like wildfire among the adventurers on the roof of the Fishermen Adventurers Guild once they realized what had happened. The target of their wrath was the Iron Tiger Troop—specifically Leon.

“Sh-shit...!” Leon cursed.

“Hey, Leon,” Nick said calmly.

“You bastard... You set us up, didn’t you?!” Leon seethed.

“You have no right to say that... It’s true, though,” Nick responded exasperatedly. “You’ve drawn a lot of attention to yourself. I’m sure you thought you were being sneaky with those telepathy orbs, but there are loads of people who suspected you. Vilma arranged this duel in an attempt to expose you.”

“Don’t speak for me. The only thing I didn’t expect was for you Survivors to catch on to my plan,” Vilma said. The Adventurers Guild was an accomplice not of the Iron Tiger Troop but of the Survivors.

Zem was the one who’d initiated the partnership. He’d found the unlicensed gambling den the Iron Tiger Troop used as their base through his intelligence-gathering efforts in the nightlife district, and after casually speaking with the customers, he figured out that Leon and the other two were using some method to cheat at duels and gambling. Furthermore, he learned the frequency of the Iron Tiger Troop’s cheating had increased significantly after a trip into the Labyrinth of Bonds. He then remembered Bond mentioning there were telepathy orbs on the fake final floor. It was possible the Iron Tiger Troop had found some magic items in the labyrinth and kept them for themselves, just like the Survivors had with the Sword of Bonds.

Zem approached Vilma once he’d obtained this circumstantial evidence. He told her there was a possibility the Iron Tiger Troop was performing systematic fraud. It turned out the Adventurers Guild was already suspicious of them, but they didn’t have any proof to act on.

The duel with the Survivors was a chance to obtain some and expose their schemes. Zem smiled and asked if the guild had used them, and Vilma admitted he was right. They then made an agreement.

“The guild agreed to give us a reward if we succeeded at exposing the Iron Tiger Troop’s cheating...which is much appreciated, given that we had to delay our labyrinth exploration,” Zem explained with a smile.

The anger toward Leon on the rooftop intensified. Every one of the spectators was now determined not to let him get away. There were shouts for him to give them their money back—there must have been some among them who he had exploited at gambling.

“What’re you gonna do, Leon? I’m fine with calling this here, but... Wanna try actually fighting before they tie you up?” Nick called.

“What did you just say?” Leon barked.

“I’m telling you to stop running and gimme your best shot. Maybe you can save at least a little face.”

“...Damn it all to hell!”

Leon yelled and charged at Nick with murderous intent. Despite his rage, his movements were fluid. He knew how to make full use of his flexibility and powerful blows. He kicked off the ground and used the momentum to concentrate a fearsome amount of strength into his fists. It would mean a world of pain if that punch connected.

Nick pitied the tigerian. He was clearly skilled. His muscles were proof of his dogged training. Stalling in a boxing match was a difficult feat that could not be achieved without real physical and mental resilience. Transitioning to an attack from that strategy required experience and bravery, and a deadly blow that was refined with much practice.

“Huh?!” Leon shouted.

“This is the end for you, buster,” Nick said.

If that was all you could do, however, a skilled opponent was going to read you like a book. Leon’s punch could’ve been the strongest blow in the world, but dodging it was a cinch for Nick.

It happened too fast for Leon to follow. Nick evaded his fist and, less than a second later, hit him squarely in the jaw.



A Guide to Gambling



In the end, the goal shifted from winning the duel to arresting the Iron Tiger Troop. So many instances of fraud and cheating using the telepathy orbs came to light that it quickly became clear it would be impossible to uncover all their crimes on the spot. The accusations, which included cheating at duels and at cards in bars, tricking men into giving Claudine money, and more, piled up until the problem grew too large for the Adventurers Guild to resolve on its own. The members of the Iron Tiger Troop were quickly handed to the Sun Knights and escorted to prison. It was a triumphant victory for the Survivors.

There was one miscalculation, however. News of the total exposure of Iron Tiger Troop's wrongdoings spread far and wide and resulted in an unintended consequence.

"I didn't expect this many other victims to come forward. There's no end to them... I have no idea if I'll even get my money back." Nick sighed in his room the day after the duel.

"There is no use complaining. If you were the only one to get your money back, it might have bred jealousy and more trouble for you in the future. At least the guild gave you a reward." Bond made a very reasonable point.

"I guess that's true."

"Why not be satisfied with that and get some rest like Karan?"

Nick decided to take his advice. Karan had had the most difficult role during the duel, having to work on the math problems until Claudine decided to use the telepathy orbs. They'd turned the tables on the Iron Tiger Troop's strategy of stalling to create a long duel and guarantee their victory, but it was a tiring endeavor, and Karan had also spent the past week studying around the clock. The effort

exhausted her, and she had been sleeping in her room next door to Nick's ever since she'd returned to the inn.

Nick had knocked on her door the next morning to try to wake her up, but she told him to go away and went back to sleep. It was now evening, and she was still lazing away in bed. Karan normally rose early and woke up Nick or went out to spend the whole day visiting different restaurants, so this was a first.

"Maybe I should bring her some kind of treat later," Nick said.

"Yes, that would be nice. She studied so hard. You must be tired, too," Bond replied.

"Only mentally. That fight was really annoying."

"You feel no pain after getting punched that many times?"

"Zem fixed me up... Anyway, I'm gonna go out for a bit."

"Go out? Where?"

"There's a park where idols sometimes perform surprise concerts. I wanna give it a look."

"Your love for idols continues to amaze me..."

"I read in some book that people need time to themselves. Don't you have something you do for fun, Bond?"

"Hmm...I used to livestream when the internet existed."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"Eh, you wouldn't understand. I want to go with you. The surprise concert sounds fun."

"Really? What a pain..."

"Oh, come on. Let me tag along this time. I want to see it."

"Fine..."

The fountain plaza in Central Park, located in the center of Labyrinth City, was always bustling with a variety of activities. The stalls and exhibits the city permitted to be set up there created a cheerful atmosphere. As long as it was sunny outside, that is.

"This is quite the downpour," Bond said.

"So much for finding a concert," Nick remarked.

Leading up to summer, the weather was fickle in Labyrinth City. It often rained with no warning. Nick and Bond took shelter under a tree.

"It doesn't appear this will stop anytime soon. What should we do?" Bond asked.

"We're gonna get wet, but we might as well return to the inn." Nick sighed. Just as they were about to leave, another person joined them under the tree.

"Dammit, I'm soaked...", the girl said, shaking water off her robe. She was a person Nick and Bond knew well.

"Tiana? What're you doing here?" Nick asked.

“Oh, hey. I could ask the same of you,” Tiana replied.

“I wanted to check out this park 'cause it's a common spot for surprise concerts, but—”

“You sure are passionate about idols... Seems like the sky had other ideas, though.” Tiana looked up at the rain clouds with a wry smile.

“What about you? Were today's dragon races canceled?”

“Dragon racing doesn't get canceled because of rain. I was going shopping today, but...” She shrugged.

“Can't really do anything in this rain. This sucks.”

“Yeah... Oh, I have an idea.”

“What's that?”

“Follow me,” Tiana said, leading them back into the rain. She dragged them along, evading Nick's questions of where they were going. She finally stopped when they reached a slightly posh area on the edge of a shopping district and an affluent neighborhood.

They stood outside a building that Nick would have thought was a luxury hotel if not for the sign. Magic lanterns illuminated the entrance, and there was no evidence that drunk guests were inside. It seemed like the place was trying to create a flashy yet elegant atmosphere.

“Welcome,” said an employee.

“Th-thanks...,” Nick responded, flustered. He had never been to an establishment like this.

“This is their first time. They're not going to register as members today, so please treat them as guests,” Tiana requested.

“Yes, ma'am. Would you like an explanation of the facilities?”

“I'll take care of it.”

“Understood. I will take your things...”

Tiana handed her staff, hat, and robe to the employee, then walked through the door and onto the carpeted floor like she owned the place. Inside, they heard soft music accompanied by the cheerful sounds of coins clinking and cards being shuffled.

“...I've never been to a casino,” Nick commented.

“This visit will be on me,” Tiana replied. She received a basket of coins from the reception desk and handed it to Nick.

“Hold on, I don't even know the rules!”

“Surely you know how to play cards, at least.”

“I've always tried to avoid playing cards, actually...” Nick looked down, embarrassed.

“I wouldn't have thought that. Are you scared?” Tiana teased, and Nick turned away awkwardly.

“I've had my fill of dealing with cheaters after that duel. We would've been in real trouble if we didn't discover their telepathy

orbs.”

“You dummy, licensed casinos like this have measures in place to prevent the use of magic... Excuse me,” Tiana called out to an employee. “Could you please show us the cards used here? It’s the first time for these two, so I want to explain how they work.”

“Yes, ma’am. Please wait a moment,” the employee answered, and fetched some cards from a nearby table. “These are the ones we use for most games.”

The employee showed Nick a deck of cards. Each card had one of four suits—earth, water, fire, and wind—and a number. These cards were used not just in the Holy Kingdom of Dineez but throughout the continent. Nick knew that a variety of games were played with them. He often saw people playing at tables in Adventurers Guilds.

“This is one of the countermeasures we have to prevent cheating,” the employee said, producing a silver stick from his chest pocket. It was a magic item called an igniter. He activated it to produce a small flame at the tip and moved it toward the card. Just when Nick grew worried it was going to catch fire, the flame disappeared.

“That card is covered with anti-magic paint. Which is quite a luxury item,” Bond remarked, surprised.

“That is correct. All cards, coins, and other items used for games in this casino have been made to repel magic. Magic items small enough to hide in one’s pocket will not work here,” the employee explained, sounding almost boastful.

Bond examined the cards with curiosity.

“They must be good to surprise you this much,” Nick said.

“Anti-magic paint is difficult to produce. It takes years and requires new moon grass, which only grows near labyrinths,” Bond responded.

“Correct again. Fortunately, there is an abundance of new moon grass around Labyrinth City, which means anti-magic paint can be procured more cheaply than in other cities,” the employee added.

“I imagine you mean cheap for a casino,” Bond said wryly, and the employee smiled.

“Anti-magic paint cannot prevent strong magic, however. That is why we collect items like staves at the door and forbid the use of magic and weapons. We ask for your understanding.”

“Thanks for the explanation. See, Nick? Nothing to worry about,” Tiana said. Sensing they didn’t need him anymore, the employee bowed and walked away.

“It’d be hard for cheaters like Leon to get in, at least,” Nick admitted.

“Exactly. It’s far more difficult to cheat here than it is in the corner of a bar.”

“That probably just means this place is crawling with truly skilled gamblers who don’t have to rely on magic. There was a guy in my old party who left penniless every time he went to a casino. There’s no way we can beat professionals.”

“I won’t deny that. It is totally possible to end up broke before you even know what’s happened.”

“Exactly.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll teach you how to avoid that.”

“Hey! What if I don’t want to play?!”

“I’m serious, Nick. Just trust me. Now let’s see... What game would be good for a beginner...?”

Tiana strode off determinedly, and Nick and Bond hurried to follow behind her. She walked right to a bar, and the three of them sat down.

“Hello. Give this kid something sweet,” she requested, and the man behind the counter briskly got to work.

Nick asked Tiana a question as he watched. “So dragon racing isn’t the only gambling you do, huh?”

“I just come here for fun. I never end up making a profit,” Tiana answered.

“I’d be surprised if you did. Oh yeah, do you know how to gamble, Bond?” Nick asked.

“...My code of ethics prohibits me from gambling. Breaking the code gives me an uncomfortable, itchy feeling,” Bond replied, puffing out his cheeks indignantly.

“That’s unfortunate. Can’t you just ignore it?” Tiana inquired.

“I could, but it is not pleasant. I’ll stay and rest here,” he said glumly, just before the bartender set a bowl in front of him. It contained a ball of vanilla ice cream topped with chocolate syrup, wafers, and mint. “Oooh, ice cream! How wonderful!” Bond’s displeasure evaporated as he dug in happily.

“Doesn’t take much to cheer you up,” Nick commented.

“Hmm-hmm, I cannot help myself when it comes to this culture’s cuisine. I am nowhere near the gourmet Karan is, though. Now, go partake in this primitive gambling you humans so enjoy. I’ll be gorging myself on sweets as you two blow all your money.” Bond laughed mockingly at Nick and Tiana and waved his spoon rudely.

“Oh, we have to win now. Let’s go, Nick,” Tiana said.

“How many times do I have to tell you, I’ve never gambled before!” Nick complained, but she grabbed him by the scruff of the neck and dragged him toward the gaming floor.

Roulette was simple to play but had great strategic depth. The dealer spun a wheel one way and tossed in a ball in the opposite direction.

Then the players bet on which pocket on the edge of the wheel the ball would fall into. That was it. The complexity came from the number of ways there were to bet. You could try to guess the exact numbered pocket where the ball would land, whether the pocket would be red or black, or pick a range of numbers.

“After the dealer spins the wheel, you’re still allowed to increase or change your bet until they stop it. Do you understand?” Tiana asked.

“I think so...,” Nick responded.

Nick had good eyes. He also had good intuition in a fight, and the bravery—or stupidity—to take on an ogre two or three heads taller than him. Despite all that, he was completely overwhelmed by the atmosphere of the casino and made nothing but small outside bets that offered low payouts. The dealer and the surrounding guests seemed to find his beginner’s behavior endearing.

Tiana, however, was getting irritated. “Stop being such a baby, Nick! You have to make bigger bets!”

“I don’t feel comfortable gambling away all your money!” Nick shouted back.

“Geez. Maybe slots would’ve been better.”

“Please, don’t drag me in too deep...”

“Says the guy who dragged us into that duel.”

“I don’t have a comeback for that...”

Nick averted his eyes awkwardly, and Tiana grinned at him.

“I’m messing with you. I just want you to have a good time.”

“...Okay. I’ll try.”

“The next game is starting. Watch carefully.”

“Got it.” Nick watched the ball as it spun rapidly around the wheel. It never seemed to move exactly as he expected before it fell into the pockets.

His betting strategy changed slightly over time. He started to watch the dealer’s fingers and eyes instead of the wheel. He came to realize that roulette wasn’t a game determined by the physics of the ball and the wheel; it was a battle with the dealer.

“Hey, you’re getting better,” Tiana said.

The ball circled around the wheel, and Nick placed his bets as the range of pockets it was likely to fall into narrowed. Now that he thought about it, the strategy of roulette was similar to boxing. Both required meticulous maneuvering and daring chances, and the patience to wait for the right moment to strike with a killer blow. The warmth on the dealer’s face was gone, and Nick caught glimpses of a sharpness in his eye. He rang the bell, signaling the end of betting.

“...Sweet!” Nick exclaimed.

“Good job!” Tiana complimented, clapping him on the back as he

received a thirty-six-fold payout.

“Congratulations,” the dealer said, handing Nick his chips. There was a fire in the dealer’s eyes that said, “It’s time to get serious.” Nick gulped with trepidation. But he also realized that was part of the fun of the game. It only truly began when both sides were intent on defeating their opponent. Nick needed to be brave, and his own fire was beginning to burn.

Nick and Tiana remained immersed in the roulette for some time. They were totally absorbed, all rational thought flying out the window as they watched the ball and made their bets.

“Dammit, I’ve lost everything I won!” Nick despaired.

“Ah-ha-ha, this guy’s not a pro for nothing. You should be proud you forced him to get serious!” Tiana praised.

“Haah... This is no place for amateurs.” Nick slumped his shoulders in disappointment, and Tiana roared with laughter. She was having a great time. She had clapped Nick on the back so many times, it was starting to bruise.

“That was fun, though, right?” Tiana asked.

“Sure, but we blew a lot of money in the process...”

“I’ll be expecting you to pay me back.”

“Hey, you said this was on you!”

“I’m kidding.”

Tiana cackled and grabbed a couple drinks from a passing waiter. They were nonalcoholic juice. Nick took a sip after she handed him one. It had the refreshing, sour taste of citrus fruit.

“...Hey, Tiana,” Nick said.

“What is it?”

“I wonder where the Iron Tiger Troop went wrong.”

“Where did that come from?”

“They cheated people at gambling parlors, remember? They could’ve come here.”

“...Maybe. We can’t know where they went wrong, and I don’t think knowing would do us any good.”

“I guess. I just feel like they weren’t so different from us.”

“How so?”

“Leon offered to sell Claudine to me when we fought behind the guild.”

“...Huh? She was his party member!” Tiana said in disbelief.

“Interestingly enough, Claudine also tried to cut ties with Leon.”

“Oh yeah, she did.”

“I think those two worked really well together. They almost caught me off guard, even if they had to use telepathy orbs to do it. But they also had a line they didn’t cross. They didn’t trust each

other.”

“...That’s what you said when we formed our party. You told us not to trust you.”

“Yeah. Their behavior resembled what I said to you guys. That’s why I was wondering... Well, I don’t know...”

“Wondering what?”

“I was thinking what if there’s a chance we could end up like them if we go wrong somewhere. It took a lot of lucky coincidences for me to find the life I have now. If one thing had gone differently...”

Nick trailed off. He was afraid to voice the rest of that sentence. Worst-case scenario, he could have preyed on his own companions the way Leon did with his own. It wouldn’t have been too difficult for him; the situation was easy to imagine.

Tiana interrupted that line of thought. “Will you cut that out, Nick?”

“Hmm?”

She flicked him on the forehead, catching him completely by surprise.

“Ow! Did you have to flick me that hard?!” Nick shouted, glaring at her.

Tiana looked even angrier than him. He opened his mouth to ask what he’d done wrong, but she barreled over him.

“Because you’re speaking nonsense!” she seethed.

“Wh-what... I still don’t know what you’re angry about.” Nick was totally lost, but his confusion was only adding oil to the fire of Tiana’s anger.

“God, you can be so annoying! You idiot!”

Nick almost told her she was being more annoying than him—and attracting suspicious looks—but he stopped himself.

Unaware of his thoughts, Tiana shrugged. “Geez, I brought you here to relax. Loosen up a little! Casinos are a paradise for adults! Going to idol concerts can’t be the only thing you do for fun!”

“I’d like to relax, but...”

“I thought you might react this way. I’m going to make sure you experience the thrill of gambling,” Tiana declared, and stole the basket Nick was holding. She grabbed a handful of coins and shoved the basket back toward him.

“H-hey, what gives?!”

“I’m going to play with the coins I just grabbed. You are not allowed to leave until that basket is empty.”

“Hold on, how long will that take?!”

“I’ll tell you once you fix that narrow-minded attitude of yours!”

Tiana stomped away, ignoring Nick’s protests.

Tiana's short temper was one of her biggest flaws; she was well aware of that. Many found her personality brash. Alex probably hated that part of her. Her instructor used to have to tell her to calm down all the time; she missed those days.

"Can I join this table?" Tiana asked.

"Hmm? Yeah, no problem."

She sat down at a table where a card game was being played. It was a game using thirty-six cards made up of four suits numbered 1 through 9 in addition to six face cards that depicted a knight, a dragon, and more. The players used the cards to make a hand. It didn't require skill in the way that shogi did, but it wasn't as luck dependent as dragon racing, either. This made it a very popular game for gambling. So popular that the sight of the man next to her ignoring his girlfriend's pleas to go home was all too common.

...Huh? She's strangely pretty.

Something about the couple next to her seemed off. The girl was cute, but her makeup was plain. It looked as if she was wearing it to avoid standing out. Young nobles occasionally disguised themselves to avoid being recognized in busy places, but if she was a noble, her boyfriend did not appear worthy of her status. He looked like a struggling gambler...though Tiana doubted he had the skill worthy of this casino. It was more likely he was just a freeloader sponging off the girl.

Is she one of those idols Nick likes? ...No, probably not.

Not wanting to be rude, Tiana shifted her attention to the game in front of her. None of the players were very good. The man sitting next to her was way too easy to read. He was clinging to his chair, which probably meant he was on a losing streak and was desperate to win all his money back.

The dealer was playing him like a sucker, and the other man at the table had jumped on the bandwagon. The cards hadn't even been dealt yet, but Tiana could tell they were looking to take advantage of him for some easy money.

"What are you waiting for?! Start the game!" the freeloader yelled.

"Yes, sir," the dealer muttered, smiling slightly. That was not a smile of hospitality—he was looking to bleed someone dry. The sight ticked Tiana off.

There was nothing particularly wrong with the dealer's attitude. Unless he was blatantly cheating, the fault lay with the freeloader for sticking to the table and continuing to lose. If anything, this was natural behavior for a dealer. The freeloader would only be getting what he deserved if he lost all his money.

What bothered Tiana was that the freeloader was not the only

person suffering here. He was most likely gambling with his girlfriend's money. The man's clothes were gaudy rather than expensive, while the girl was wearing garments that were plain yet made from high-quality fabric. It was obvious at a glance who the money was coming from. The dealer and the other man had to have realized that, but they moved to start the game while ignoring her desire to go home.

"Let us begin," the dealer said, shuffling the cards.

The girl seemed to be holding back tears. Tiana saw that and decided she was going to kick their asses.

"What...just happened...?"

Everyone other than Tiana was dumbfounded. The betting limit at the table was small, and while the dealer in charge wasn't bad, he wasn't all that skilled, either. He was little match for Tiana, who could play at tables with much higher rates. He had also gotten overly comfortable knowing that he and the other man were working together to swindle the freeloader of his money, which left him vulnerable. She easily took advantage of the situation.

Tiana lost her temper easily, but she discovered she had the ability to retain an objective view of herself as she did so. A part of her remained composed as she allowed her emotions to flare. She possessed unparalleled gambling skill when she entered this state. It was a talent she'd gained after the escalating misfortune of being betrayed by her fiancé, banished by her family, continually rejected in her job search, and getting addicted to gambling. Entering this state was extremely fatiguing, so she rarely made use of it. She much preferred dragon racing, which relied heavily on luck and could be enjoyed without intense concentration. She decided to go all out for this one occasion, however.

Tiana started by smiling suggestively at the dealer and the other man to say, "I'm on your side. Let's devour this freeloader together." The two of them believed her, after which the game was like stealing candy from a baby. It ended in a complete victory for Tiana. The dealer and the other man went from predator to prey, and the freeloader trembled as he stared at the coins he lost. She apologized as she collected her winnings in a bored manner.

"Oops, looks like I'm the only one who won here. Sorry about that," she said, not sounding remotely apologetic. She was being deliberately irritating.

"H-how dare you...!" the dealer's sidekick raged. He started to stand up, but Tiana glared at him.

"Whatever is the matter?" she asked.

"Y-you tricked us!"

“I tricked you? Do you hear yourself? That’s what people do here.”

“Grr...,” the man growled, unable to argue.

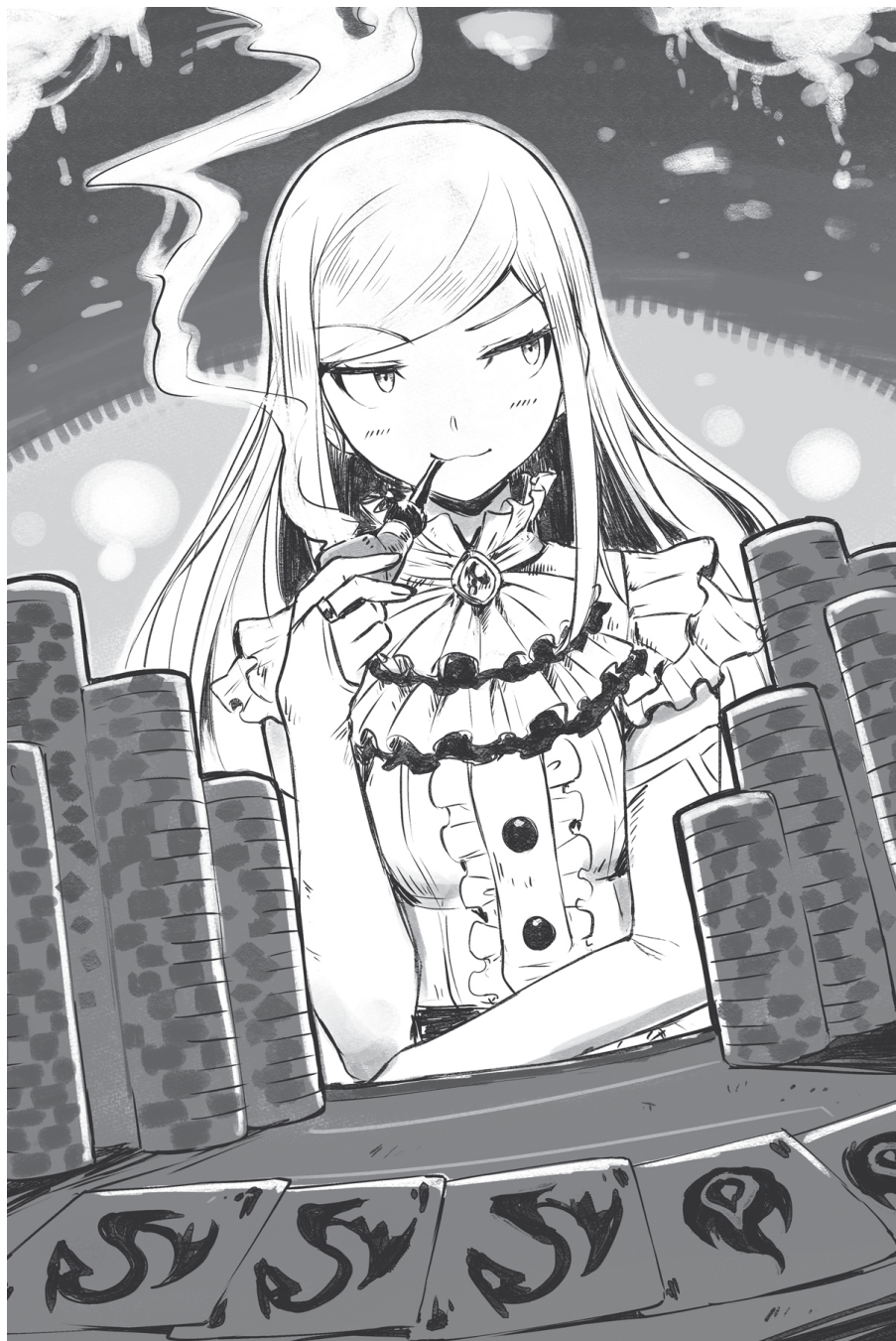
Tiana sighed and stood up, then looked at the freeloader and his girlfriend.

“Wh-what’s your problem?” the freeloader snapped.

“You have no talent for gambling... You don’t even have the right to call yourself a gambler,” she said.

“Excuse me?!”

“A true gambler plays with their own money. If you can’t do that, you’re little better than an overgrown child,” Tiana said, then left the table. She felt their resentful stares as she walked away, and she responded by flipping her hair provokingly. It was then that the men realized they were totally and utterly defeated. They could never hope to win with such flair.



There was one person at the table who reacted differently.

"U-um...can I ask you something?" the freeloader's girlfriend inquired, rushing to catch up with Tiana.

"...What?" Tiana responded without hiding her frustration or coming to a stop. She walked quickly, but the girl's taller stature allowed her to catch up without difficulty.

"Did you do that to try to make Donny—my boyfriend—walk away?"

"I saw three suckers begging to be parted from their money, so I did just that. No more, no less. Is that all you had to ask?"

"No, I...wanted to talk to you."

"Is that so? Well, too bad. I'm busy... Though now that I think about it, that man is gambling with your money. That would mean it's you I just bled dry, huh?"

"That's...true," the girl admitted, smiling foolishly.

That ticked Tiana off even more. Girls like her rubbed her the wrong way. She couldn't stand how they endlessly pampered their boyfriends while apparently convinced they were the main character of a fairy tale. As if they expected their efforts would be rewarded someday. They had no idea they were just encouraging bad habits and adding to the misfortune in the world. It was a shameful way to behave; it also reminded her of her old self.

"What are you smiling about?" Tiana snapped. She pulled out a pipe, filled it with tobacco, and lit it. But despite her efforts to display her lack of interest, the girl showed no signs of leaving. Before long, Tiana ran out of patience and caved. "Can you give me a name?"

"Yeah, his name is—"

"Not him, you. Why did you assume I was asking for his name?"

"Oh, s-sorry. My name is Belle."

"That wasn't hard, was it? I'm Tiana," she said after taking a moment to exhale some smoke. "So, Belle. Are you going to complain about your dumb boyfriend to a stranger you just met?"

"No, I don't want to complain. He's actually a nice person. He's just...going through a hard time right now," Belle explained.

"If you say so." Tiana had gone through a challenging time, too, as had her three party members. They had all gotten hooked on bad hobbies as a result. Instead of voicing this thought, she just smirked.

"...Did I say something weird?" Belle asked.

"Don't you see him for who he is? Or are you totally blind to his behavior?" Tiana responded.

"I'm not," Belle said, lowering her eyes. "But he's working really hard. He says he's going to find success."

"How long has he been saying that?"

“A year... No, half a year?” Belle counted with her fingers and was shocked by the number. “Donny’s a chef. He put in a lot of effort to be able to open his own restaurant. But eventually I started making more money than him, and once his business started to struggle, he began relying on me. He’s now been dependent on me for more than half the time we’ve been together. Ha-ha, it’s unfortunate, but... What can you do?”

A tear streaked down Belle’s face. Tiana made no move to wipe that tear. She didn’t want to comment on the life of a stranger she’d just met, nor did she feel like showing any kindness. Eventually, however, the awkwardness of the situation became too much for her to handle.

“I don’t want to tell you how to live your life, but I don’t want to hear you ramble on about your boyfriend, either, so I’ll give you one piece of advice. What if you just dump him?”

“...Huh.”

“Actually, you probably wanted to hear me say that. But no matter what I say, you’re only going to do what you want to do.”

“You don’t pull punches,” Belle said, giggling.

Tiana had no idea what she found funny. “Do I look like I care?”

“I think I’ll tell him to pull himself together one more time. I’ll make that his last chance.”

Typical strategy for a gambler—believing one last try was going to fix everything and then failing to walk away afterward. Tiana refrained from saying as much, though. Insisting that Belle dump him now would only make the girl dig in her heels, so she decided to leave for real this time.

“Well, I’m going to join back up with my friends...,” Tiana said, but as she began to walk away, she heard metal being crushed from the direction of the casino’s entrance.

“Aaaaahhh!”

“M-monster...!”

“R-run! Run for your life! Don’t just stand around!”

People began to scream immediately afterward. This didn’t make sense—the casino was heavily guarded.

“Wh-what’s going on?! Is it a thief?!” Belle exclaimed.

“There’s no way a thief could get in... Is that a monster?!” Tiana said.

Fear filled the hearts of Belle and the people who heard Tiana’s words. There was no one around who could currently handle a monster. Screams and roars echoed throughout the casino.

A Troubled Past and a Violent Present



There was once an adventurer's party called the Silver Tiger Troop. They'd been active ten years ago, and few remembered them now. The B-rank party was full of mighty warriors, and they were all enthusiasts of the ancient civilization.

"We're going to find hidden treasures from the past, Leon."

The leader was Bishot, Leon's older brother. He was an intellectual, which was unusual for the typically rough-mannered tigerians. He mingled with humans and devoted himself to studying, and he even learned the language of the ancient civilization. He had a sense of humor, he was strong, and he attracted many companions to his side. Leon admired his older brother and was always following in his footsteps. The downfall of the Silver Tiger Troop began with their greatest success.

There was a labyrinth called the Mechanical Moon Facility. It was a hellish labyrinth overrun with miasma and crawling with magic dolls from the ancient civilization that had been turned into monsters. Only B-rank adventurers were allowed to enter, owing to its difficulty, and it had never been completely explored. Its confusing layout and various traps were an even bigger hurdle than its powerful monsters. It required more than strength to overcome, in a sense making it harder than some labyrinths meant for A-rank adventurers. The Silver Tiger Troop was the first party to reach the end, and Bishot the hero unraveled its mysteries.

The Silver Tiger Troop earned more than just prestige for their efforts—they also obtained a great many artifacts including the Butterfly Sword, a magic sword that manipulated light and sound to dazzle opponents; the False Root Staff, which enabled control over nonactivated magic dolls; and the Phantom King Orb, a hidden treasure of the a legendary extinct race called the phantasms. That was only scratching the surface of discoveries, and each item

possessed extraordinary functionality.

An endless stream of people offered to pay any amount of money for their artifacts, begged them to at least hold an auction if they were overwhelmed by the number of hopeful buyers, or told them they could receive peerage and a hefty reward if they offered their findings to the royal palace. Before long, one of the party members succumbed to greed; they stole the Butterfly Sword and sold it.

Bishot was smart but lacked social status. He had little experience negotiating with merchants and nobles. As such, he decided to entrust the Merchants Guild with the task of selling the artifacts, even if it meant paying a hefty handling fee. This was where things started to go wrong, changing their lives forever.

It wasn't clear who started it. All Leon remembered was the horrible sight of his brother and his party members locked in a bloody struggle. Bishot was killed, and his companions—former companions—fled. The Silver Tiger Troop's reputation was ruined forever. As payment for their breach of contract, the Merchants Guild confiscated the capital Bishot had accumulated from his party's adventures, as well as the estate he'd built to live with his members in. In one night, Leon had lost his friends, his family, and his fortune.

From that day onward, Leon decided he couldn't trust anyone. Party members were nothing more than business partners. You could never trust them, and you needed to cut them off before they did the same to you.

That sentiment was why Claudine was the perfect partner for him. She ruined others' lives without hesitation and was always happy to join him in his sinister plots. She would also betray him in a moment if he ever let his guard down, and she was too wary to let him do the same to her. She was a good woman who solidified his belief that people could not be trusted.

Begg was shockingly airheaded for someone so smart, but he seemed to enjoy working with Leon. He never showed a hint of a guilty conscience as he went out drinking after a successful job. His personality made him prone to wrongdoing. Leon had other party members he had tied up with money and threats, but he enjoyed working with Claudine and Begg the most.

Where did they go wrong?

The beginning of their downfall was finding those telepathy orbs. They were undeniably useful items, but the three of them grew sloppy as a result. Encountering a victim after they were finished with them was something they never would have allowed to happen before they used the orbs.

Then there was their quarrel with Nick's group. At first, Leon didn't understand Claudine's fixation on Nick. He was actually grateful

to him for warning Claudine and preventing her escape. Once he'd talked to the man, however, he came to understand why. Nick didn't give in to his despair. He was trying to make an honest living in this city where one moment of weakness could lead to losing everything.

Leon had been half serious when he'd offered to sell Claudine to Nick. He wouldn't have minded seeing both of them twisted and broken. He would have even been all right with making Nick his partner. But Nick responded like an honorable man. That left no doubt—Nick was an enemy he needed to destroy.

"All your assets will be sold, and that money will be allocated to your victims."

But things didn't go according to plan. Leon lost the duel, and the discovery of their attempt to cheat led to their extensive history of fraud being exposed. He was arrested by the Order of the Sun Knights and imprisoned in a small, dark stone room, where he was currently being interrogated.

"The treasure you had hidden in your room has been confiscated. It's all going to be auctioned off. But, Leon..."

"What now?"

The knight interrogating him let the silence stretch out, and Leon held his tongue. The knight then wrapped his thick hands around Leon's neck.

"...Grk," Leon grunted.

"Don't even try to pretend that's all of it. I know your background. You're one of the surviving members of the Silver Tiger Troop," the knight said. Blood rushed to Leon's head in anger. "You're not still hiding some treasure you stole back then, are you? Three artifacts were never found—the Butterfly Sword, the False Root Staff, and the Phantom King Orb. Selling just one of those would allow us to reimburse your victims in full. Give it up and tell me where they are."

"...ff."

"What was that?"

"Piss off! I don't have them!"

"Hmph. Are you saying your other companions stole them? Didn't you kill them yourself? Tell me everything you know. It'll only make things easier for you."

The knight relaxed his grip and let go of Leon's neck.

Leon glared, but the knight didn't flinch. He just grinned mockingly.

"Not one of those three artifacts has been seen on the black market. Why conceal them if you're not going to sell them or use them? Where are they?" the knight asked.

"That's the reason for your accusation? You guessed wrong," Leon responded.

“My investigation will determine how true that claim is.”

“You’re closer than you think, though. I am hiding an artifact—it’s just not one of those three.”

“What?”

Leon chuckled. There was one secret he’d kept even from Bishot. He couldn’t trust anyone with it. After all, he was hiding something from the rest of the party—he’d found the greatest treasure in the Mechanical Moon Facility and kept it for himself. He didn’t have a use for it because of how dangerous it was, and he couldn’t sell it, either. But the time had finally come.

Now that the knight was frightened of his ominous warnings, Leon shouted, “...Guess I’ve got no choice! Come to me, Sword of Ruin!”

The Mechanical Moon Facility was originally a research center built by the ancient civilization. Its purpose had been to study and develop radical methods of clearing the miasma that caused monsters to spawn. Many magic items and magic dolls were created there. The most dangerous item in the facility was the holy sword known as the Sword of Evolution.

Swords imbued with enchantments were called magic swords, and the greatest magic swords were called holy swords. Not all of them were created equal, however. The very best ones were made with an idea in mind. They weren’t just weapons of great power—they were developed with an eye on what that power could be used for.

As the name implied, the Sword of Evolution had been forged with the assumption that people were creatures that evolved and adapted to their environment. The world was made up of many races, including humans, beastmen, dwarves, and elves. But if you traced all their lineages back far enough, you would arrive at the same diminutive mammalian ancestor. This indicated that people changed and evolved into new forms to better suit their circumstances. If this was true, people should be able to transform into a being that was no longer threatened by miasma and the monsters it births. The Sword of Evolution’s purpose was to bring about that evolution in its user, allowing them to easily defeat monsters.

Unfortunately, the user’s sudden transformation also left them deranged. While the effect was only temporary, the sword’s ability to force evolution in a single individual struck fear in the hearts of all who witnessed it. Some wondered if the sword’s dangerous power brought about ruin instead. This led the Sword of Evolution to be called the Sword of Ruin.

“Wh-what the?!”

“Was that a sword?!”

A sword flew through the Sun Knights' interrogation room as if it had a mind of its own. It was just like the Sword of Bonds. The aura emerging from the hilt formed a curved blade like golden moonlight, and the handguard was set with a glowing stone that resembled a cat's eye. The weapon hadn't injured anyone, but many of the knights trembled at the unusual sight.

"Long time no see, Leon. It appears as if you are finally ready to use me. Took you long enough," the Sword of Ruin said into Leon's mind.

"Oh, shut it. I didn't know what would happen if I did," Leon responded.

"I don't see any other options available to you now," it replied coolly, but Leon could still hear the delight in its voice.

"...You're right about that. I have one request, though."

"What is that?"

"There's some assholes I wanna kill. An adventurer named Nick and my former comrades from the Silver Tiger Troop."

"I may be a holy sword, but I cannot find a person using their name alone. Do you remember their scents? I can configure your evolution to attain senses equivalent to a beast. That will enable you to find them yourself."

"Sounds good to me."

Leon was conversing with the sword floating before him. The knights had no idea what he was talking about, but they knew it meant danger. That intuition backfired on them.

"D-don't move! Stay away from that sword!" a knight yelled, but Leon ignored him and gripped the sword's handle.

"*Evolution*," Leon chanted. A golden light surged forth from the sword.

"Gaahhh?!"

Less than a second later, the knights were sent flying and knocked unconscious.

The Sore Loser



“Where are you, Nick...?! I can smell you... I know you’re here!”

A black tigerlike monster had broken into the casino and begun to wreak havoc. If people with tiger ears and a tail were called tigerians, this creature was the opposite—it was a giant tiger with human features. It stood on two legs and held an aura blade. Its face, however, was clearly a tiger’s. Beastmen such as tigerians and dragonians had human faces with animal features; but a being with an animal face was immediately seen as a monster rather than a human. It was also nearly twice as big as the average person—there was no doubt it was a monster.

The casino’s customers ran away in a panic, and the employees bravely tried to stop it. The tiger monster was too strong, however, and it swatted large men out of the way as if they were flies.

“Wh-what the heck is that? And how does it know Nick’s name...?” Tiana muttered.

“I-is that a friend of yours?” Belle asked.

“Are you kidding? Who could be friends with a creature like that!” Tiana shouted.

The two girls were flustered. The entire casino had descended into chaos.

It should have been impossible for a monster to be here. There were systems in place in Labyrinth City to quickly put together an extermination squad if monsters ever left a labyrinth and tried to enter the city. On the off chance it was too much for an extermination squad to handle, the casino and other such facilities would go into lockdown before it could reach their doors. But no one could deny the reality of the tiger monster standing before them.

“Wh-who are you?! Are you a monster?!”

A group of guards gathered in the confusion and stood in the tiger's way. The ones holding spears surrounded the beast and attacked bravely, while others stayed back and chanted spells. The guards reacted quickly, as they had been trained to do. Tiana breathed a sigh of relief. It was only one monster, and it was only slightly bigger than an ogre. She was sure the guards could handle it.

"Where'd you come from, ruffian?!"

"Don't falter! Attack!"

"Its size makes it an easy target! ...Huh?"

The guards were definitely not weak. Tiana could tell they were comparable to the adventurers who frequented Fishermen. The customers probably found their presence reassuring as well.

That reassurance soon gave way to fear.

"O-our spears aren't working...?" a guard said.

The tiger grinned as they tried to stab it with their weapons. Some of the spears had broken through the beast's skin, but no blood dripped from the wounds.

"You're not bad... But you're no match for me," the monster taunted.

An ominous boom echoed through the casino. It was the sound of the tiger's arm slicing through the air as it violently swung at the spearmen. That was all it took to sweep each and every one of them away, sending them crashing through tables topped with green felt.

"T-take this!"

The guards positioned farther back cast spells to attack it. They used an earth-elemental spell called Stone Bullet. It was a simple one that fired heavy and sharp stones and was effective against a wide range of enemies. Multiple stones struck the tiger's body.

"Did it work?!"

"...This is so boring. Is that really all you've got?"

The tiger wasn't harmed at all. It didn't even lose its balance.

"I-impossible..."

The monster didn't give them time to prepare another wave of spells; it jumped forward and scattered them with violent punches and kicks. Over half the guards who'd gathered to oppose it had been defeated. Some of them were positioned in other areas, and employees who were guiding customers joined the fight, but a sense of hopelessness had pervaded the casino. The customers panicked as they scrambled to escape.

"R-run! That monster's gonna eat us!"

"Aaaah!"

It was chaos. The casino had a limited number of exits, to prevent losing customers from running away before they paid what they owed. The windows required a ladder to reach, and the employee exit was

narrow and difficult to find. As such, with the tiger monster blocking the main entrance, the customers were forced to crowd around the employee exit in their attempt to escape. People pushed and shoved violently in their hysteria.

“D-Donny, wait for me!”

“Let me go!”

Belle tried to follow the freeloader, but he shoved her away. He charged into the crowd and out of view, interested only in saving himself.

“What... Wh-why...?” Belle despaired, sinking to the floor. She stared blankly in the direction the freeloader disappeared, not even thinking of getting up. No one paid her any mind. Not even when a spear point that was lodged in the rampaging tiger’s body was expelled and sent flying in the direction of her head.

No one except for Tiana, that is.

“Ah...,” Belle gasped.

“You idiot!” Tiana yelled before tackling her to the ground. The spear point passed through the air where Belle’s head had been not a moment before.

“Eeek!”

“Don’t just sit there! Get up and run!”

“I—I can’t stand!”

“Then crawl if you have to, peabrain!” Tiana scolded.

The situation was getting worse by the moment. Some were still trying to fight off the tiger, but no one was able to injure it. One person after another fell. Nearly all the guards holding spears had been defeated. The ones in the rear were doing their part by attacking it with spells such as Stone Bullet and Fire Bullet, but they had no visible effect. The tiger’s laughter boomed louder with each strike, causing the guards to cringe in fear.

“Th-this is bad... I don’t even have my staff...,” Tiana muttered. She didn’t think she would be able to help anyway. She would have picked up someone else’s staff and joined the fight if she thought her spells would hurt the tiger even a little, but attacking at random wasn’t going to do any good. Also, it was searching for Nick. Tiana’s mental abacus did the calculations and came to the conclusion that the best thing to do would be to join up with him and run.

“Hmm...? Hey, you there!”

Her plan was foiled immediately when the monster called out to her. She pretended not to notice and tried to sneak away with Belle.

“I’m talkin’ to you, blondie! I know you can hear me,” it called out again.

“Wh-what do you want...? Who are you...?” Tiana asked.

“Don’t worry, I’m not gonna eat you. You know Nick, right?” the

tiger said with a wicked grin.

Tiana thought the smile seemed familiar. *Where have I...? No, there's no way I've met a monster like this before... And I highly doubt Nick has, either.*

Belle cowered and hid behind Tiana. She kicked Belle with her heel to shoo her away, but Belle didn't budge.

"Guess you don't recognize me with this new face. It's Leon, from the Iron Tiger Troop you Survivors just defeated," the tiger said.

"Whuh?! Y-you've...sure changed a lot in the past few days... H-have you put on weight?" Tiana responded.

"Let's cut to the chase. Hand over that slimy bastard, and I'll let you live. I have no interest in the girl hiding behind you, either. She's free to go."

"Huh?"

Tiana was surprised by his proposal. He had been rampaging like the wild beast he appeared to be from the moment he entered the casino, but now he suddenly had the presence of mind to negotiate. It was strange. She found it difficult to believe this composure would last. If he could come to his senses with no warning, it was possible he could lose his mind again just as quickly. It would be dangerous to provoke him.

"I'm sure you don't believe me, but I'm serious. I became a little overexcited when I got this new body, but I'm used to it now. I'm not gonna cause any more needless destruction... Well, as long as you do what I say."

"As long as I give you Nick, you mean?"

How stupid are you? Tiana mentally grumbled. She couldn't find Nick in this chaos if she tried. Nearly all the guards had been defeated, customers were crammed around the employee exit in their desperation to escape, and the employees and dealers were hiding and watching her and Leon with bated breath. Given the size of this disturbance, it was likely someone had already notified the Sun Knights.

That meant the best thing to do would be to buy time. Tiana set her mind's abacus to work to determine her next action. She could save her life by pretending to cooperate with Leon and move as slowly as possible. She thought of resisting with a spell but abandoned it as a bad idea. Even if the spell managed to hurt him, if it didn't kill him in one hit or knock him out, he would kill her a moment later.

"What's there to think about? You have no obligation to protect your party members," Leon said, stroking Tiana's chin with a claw. The claw was hard and terrifyingly sharp, and one stroke was enough to draw blood. "Oh, don't even think about tryin' to buy time. First sign of that, and I'll crush your head like a grape. My nose has gotten

much better. I can tell by your scent if you're up to no good."

Tiana's mind's abacus was reset. He might have been bluffing, but what he said was plausible. Every now and then she encountered beastmen at the casino who were absurdly good at gambling. When she observed them closely, she would occasionally see them sniff the air. There might have been some people who could use smell to tell if someone was lying or not.

That left Tiana with one option. She should temporarily cooperate with Leon. It would take a lot of effort just to push their way through the crowded casino. Buying time would not be difficult. Help would surely arrive before they found Nick. She was *not* betraying him. Besides, she was being threatened—no matter how much Nick trusted her, she was hardly in a position to resist. Nothing she did in an emergency like this could be held against her. An endless stream of excuses rushed through Tiana's head.

"There's no way I'd ever tell you where he is, you moron," Tiana said, ultimately deciding to throw out all those excuses and reject Leon.

"...I thought you were a smart girl, but I guess I was wrong. Aren't you afraid of death?" Leon responded in disbelief. He looked at her with pity, as if she were a child, and sighed.

"Oh, shut the hell up. No one is going to go through life without facing a few life-or-death situations."

"Yeah, you're probably right. It's the smart ones who survive. Dying for some personal principle is a pathetic waste."

"So you're saying I should betray him?"

"That's right."

"I take that to mean you've betrayed and lied to countless people in your life."

"Damn right I have. You got a problem with that?"

Leon smiled without a hint of guilt, and Tiana looked at him with disinterest.

"...Not really. I won't blame anyone for making the choices you have when their life is turned upside down. But Nick is different," she said.

"...How so?" Leon asked.

"For one, he didn't try to drag anyone down with him when he was going through a hard time. He didn't even think about making himself feel better by causing others to suffer as much as he had. He's not like you. If you want a new partner, look elsewhere."

"I see. You've chosen death."

"I'll say it as many times as you need to hear it. You—can't—beat—Nick." Tiana said each word slowly with emphasis to make her point clear.

Leon lifted his arm high.

A shrill scream echoed throughout the casino. It was Belle, who was still cowering behind her. *I told you to crawl if you had to*, Tiana cursed. But it was too late to escape. Leon was already intent on killing Tiana.

“...Can you wait a moment? Let me have one more smoke before I die,” she said, pulling out her pipe and igniter.

The igniter resembled a metal pen and could generate a flame on the tip to burn tobacco leaves or start a fire. It was a simple tool, but there was a wide range of luxury versions that featured extravagant decorations or added functionality. Using a more expensive igniter was a show of status. Tiana handled hers with elegance and grace.

“I’ve thought this since I saw you at the guild, but you’re a bold girl...,” Leon muttered in admiration. Tiana exhaled a puff of smoke.

“These are all valuable items, you know. This pipe is made from the wood of a sacred tree, and the leaves are a special grade cultivated in a land to the south. This is no ordinary igniter, either,” Tiana said.

Most igniters were simple metal sticks that produced a small flame at its tip. The one Tiana had received from her instructor was special, however. It could do much more than produce a small flame. It could also perform a wind spell called Leaf Blower to gather fallen leaves, an earth spell called Rock Solid to make objects harder and less fragile, and a lightning spell called Lightning Fire, which started a fire with electricity through piezoelectric ignition.

It was very convenient, but being no larger than a pen limited its durability. Using a spell with lethal force would likely break it, so it was built with a limiter to prevent use of a spell that powerful. Conversely, removing the limiter and filling it with a significant amount of mana would allow it to be used as a deadly single-use weapon.

Tiana casually removed the limiter.

“Harden! Lightning Burst!”

“Graaaagh?!”

Tiana stabbed the sharp end of the igniter into Leon’s arm as hard as she could and sent electricity coursing through his body.

“Wh-what the...? Why did that work?!” Leon cried. The unpleasant stench of burning flesh filled the air. “Y-you little...!”

“Electric spells burn the inside of the body rather than the outside! They’re effective against monsters with shells and thick pelts... It was a gamble whether it would work on you, though!” Tiana yelled, dragging the limp Belle to her feet. She then sprinted away from Leon.

“Get yourself together and run!” she shouted at Belle.

“S-sorry...!” Belle gasped.

“We have to escape before he recovers!”

They were forced to a stop when a large table fell right in front of them. The green felt of the table blocked their path like a wall. The floor shook from the impact, throwing Tiana and Belle off balance.

“...Thanks for showin’ me that attack. I mighta been in trouble if a powerful mage hit me with a lightning spell at full blast. There was a fifty-fifty chance I woulda fainted.”

Tiana and Belle turned around, trembling with fear. They saw Leon with his arms raised. The table that should have been near him was gone. He had picked it up and thrown it like a ball.

“Wh-what? His arms...,” Tiana gasped. Despite her attack, there was no trace of burns on them. The fur covering them was undisturbed.

“Your attack did hurt me, but not enough that I needed to recover,” Leon responded.

That’s ridiculous, Tiana cursed. Casting a spell on the inside of someone’s body was a taboo. Even a weak spell was perfectly capable of killing a person. It was commonly performed on monsters that were resistant to magic. If that didn’t work, she was at a total loss for what to do next.

“Uh, is it too late for me to surrender?” she asked.

“We’re well past that point, missy,” Leon replied.

“Th-that’s what I thought.”

“It was nice knowin’ you.”

In an apparent show of mercy, Leon lifted his aura blade overhead. He was going to end her life quickly and painlessly rather than torment her with his claws. Seeing no way to escape, she readied herself for death.

“What the—?!” Leon shouted.

Just before Leon’s sword reached Tiana’s neck, Nick jumped forward and blocked it with the Sword of Bonds in hand.

“Ah...,” Tiana gasped.

“Sorry for the wait!” Nick shouted.

Tiana fought to hold back a sudden surge of tears and glared at him furiously. “What the hell took you so long?! You idiot! Moron! Why don’t you try pulling your head out of the clouds and think about something other than idols for once!”

“Hey, my love of idols has nothing to do with this! I was just stuck in the bathroom! Dozens of people rushed in outta nowhere and I couldn’t get out!” Nick yelled back as he held off Leon’s sword.

It didn’t take Tiana long to realize Nick’s arrival hadn’t done much to improve the situation. Leon’s broad smile was evidence of that.

“Heh, you finally decided to show yourself. Ready to die?” Leon taunted.

“Ngh... Wha...?” Nick grunted.

Leon used a fraction of his strength to force Nick down to one knee, then leaned his whole body weight against him. He looked like an adult tormenting a child.

“Shit... Tiana!” Nick yelled.

“What?!” Tiana responded.

“Let’s do it! Now!”

“What are you...? Wait, you mean—?! Do you think it’ll work?!”

“Does it look like we have much choice?!”

Leon and Belle stared at them blankly, having no idea what they were talking about.

Leon’s smile then broadened. “Heh, you got some ace up your sleeve? Gimme your best shot,” he said.

“Stop them, Leon... That sword is dangerous! End this now while you have the chance!” his sword entreated.

“Shut up!” Leon shouted.

The sight of Leon talking to his sword gave Tiana déjà vu. But this wasn’t the time to dwell on it.

“You’re right. Let’s do this!” she said.

“*Union!*”

A tremendous light flowed from the Sword of Bonds and bathed the area in white.

The Lovely Paladin



A white knight appeared where Nick and Tiana had been standing, surprising everyone. It wasn't the sudden appearance that was astonishing—it was the knight's very presence.

They had long golden hair that was both regal and beautiful. Their mystical figure was feminine yet lean and toned. A gap between the hem of their tunic and their boots revealed thin black fabric that made their thighs look like those of a supple panther.

Their pure white armor seemed like it had come out of a myth or a legend. It wasn't thick and didn't cover their entire body, but that didn't mean it wasn't unreliable. It was as light and beautiful as a hawk soaring through the skies. The sword was a magical sight as well—the blade was a beam of blue light that extended from the guard in the shape of a rapier.

The white knight's face left the deepest impression of all. It was dignified and sharp and seemed to lie between genders. Everyone was taken by its beauty.

"I-is that you, Tiana...?" Belle asked after collapsing to the floor once again. The knight's face did resemble Tiana's, but they were taller and bigger, and their clothes were different as well.

"“Hmm, good question. I'm not sure what to call myself... Let's just say I'm no one important,”" the white knight answered, dodging the question. They were actually a combination of Nick and Tiana after using Union, but they couldn't exactly tell people that.

"Are you...Nick?" Leon asked next.

"“Keep guessing,”" they taunted, thrusting the Sword of Bonds into the floor with an alluring smile. Frigid air gushed forth from the spot, starting as a gentle, chilly breeze and steadily increasing in force. Everyone watching could sense the coming storm.

“Back up if you don’t want to catch a cold.”

“Oh, o-okay...,” Belle squeaked. She crawled away, still unable to stand. The white knight watched her go and decided to create a partition to separate themselves and Leon from their timid onlookers.

“*Ice Shield.*”

The knight snapped their fingers, causing a giant boom to reverberate throughout the entire casino. Multiple giant walls of ice, more than twice as tall as a person, suddenly surrounded Leon and Nick/Tiana, confining them within.

“Heh...not bad. How’d you pull that off?” Leon asked, baring his fangs and laughing uproariously.

“The weather has been fickle lately. Maybe winter came early this year?”

The white knight meant that as a joke, but the second part was not far from the truth. They had summoned a harsh winter to the casino’s main floor using a spell called Ice Age, which could manipulate the cold air in an area at will. It was a difficult one that normally required a ritual performed by multiple people to cast, but Nick/Tiana pulled it off alone. Its powerful effect allowed the user to cast water and ice spells such as Ice Shield whenever, wherever, and in whatever shape they wanted within the spell’s range. Essentially, Ice Age enabled them to cast Ice Shield in quick succession and create multiple large walls of ice.

“Eh, what do I care about how you did it? Probably some spell. This suits me perfectly... Hope you’re ready for a fight!” Leon yelled. He gripped his sword and charged toward the white knight with tremendous weight and speed.

“*Ice Spear.*”

Before he could reach them, however, spears of ice formed around the tiger from all directions and shot toward him. This was an advanced version of Icicle Dance, which normally summoned only one shard of ice, but the white knight used it to create multiple shards and attack Leon from above, the sides, and below. They pierced his body mercilessly.

“Gaaaaaah?!”

“Do not fret, Leon. I am here... Now allow your anger to surge forth!”

“You got it. I won’t let anyone mock me... Oooooohhhhh!”

A strange voice seemed to speak to Leon, and then something astonishing happened. Leon’s monstrous tiger limbs bulged and swelled. They didn’t swell like balloons—instead, his already muscular body grew even tougher and larger. His contracting muscles smashed the spears of ice to pieces, and his wounds healed completely.

“Phew... That was really painful...” He sighed.

“That’s the spirit, Leon. Make full use of my abilities.”

“Oh, back off... I don’t need your help!”

““Who are you talking to?”” Nick/Tiana asked dubiously. It was the Sword of Bonds who answered.

“That voice... I knew it. You’re the Sword of Evolution,” he said.

“And you’re the Sword of Bonds... It’s been centuries,” the other sword responded.

““Do you know this sword, Bond?””

“Y-yes... That sword was developed in the same era as me,” Bond answered evasively.

“Greetings, wielder of the Sword of Bonds. I am the Sword of Evolution, or as some call me, the Sword of Ruin. I am a holy sword... though I suppose failing the selection process for the Demon King Subjugation Plan gives me no right to that designation. It must be fate that has brought me together with another holy sword after all this time.”

The Sword of Bonds responded angrily to the Sword of Ruin’s bitter words. “Do not lie! You were eliminated for violating regulations well before the selection process! Wielder of the Sword of Evolution, hear my words! You will lose your humanity if you continue to use that sword!”

““H-he’ll lose his humanity?!!”” the white knight exclaimed, shocked.

“Yes. It has a signature ability, similar to Union. It is called Evolution—”

“Shut the hell up already!” Leon yelled, interrupting the Sword of Bonds’s explanation. He charged toward the white knight once again.

““Listen, Leon!””

“I’d rather lose my humanity than die! I don’t care as long as I’m able to kill you!”

““L-Leon! It doesn’t sound like you to be this impetuous and brutish! It’s usually your style to be more...clandestine!””

“I said shut up!”

The Sword of Ruin was shaped by mana just like the Sword of Bonds. Gold light reminiscent of a full moon gushed forth from the handle, the length of the blade matching Leon’s anger. It was an intimidating sight.

“It is no use. He is in an extreme state of agitation due to the Sword of Ruin’s influence. You should not expect him to be capable of holding a conversation.”

““That’s awful... I thought it was illegal to make a magic sword that could brainwash its wielder.””

“It certainly was. It was removed from the development race and sealed for that very reason. I cannot comprehend why someone would

use such a dangerous weapon..." The Sword of Bonds sighed.

The Sword of Ruin laughed mockingly. "That is a simple difference of opinion. This excited state is nothing more than a temporary effect of using my power. Strengthening one's body will inevitably have an effect on their mind. This is natural for any living organism. As a child grows into an adult, their mind will change accordingly. I fail to see the issue."

"That is hardly equivalent. You guide your wielder to evolve against their will."

"I just give advice. It is up to my wielder to accept it. Besides, Evolution will never transform my wielder in a way they do not desire. It is designed to give them the form they wish to assume, nothing more. I understand my wielder on a personal level. The high-handed way you choose your users, on the other hand, is the epitome of arrogance."

"Cease your sophistry!"

The Sword of Ruin was unbothered by the Sword of Bonds's criticism. Their ideologies diverged so thoroughly it was as if they had been created to oppose each other.

"Ha, accuse me of whatever you like. I must say, I am disappointed. I would have thought the Sword of Bonds more capable than this. It seems bonds pale in comparison to the power of Evolution."

"That's my line. You are capable of nothing but brute strength."

"Simple attacks are effective in any situation. You, on the other hand, are powerless. Your magic cannot harm us, and your physical strength is lacking. We have also only scratched the surface of my power. How do you intend to oppose us?"

No matter how much the swords seemed to think so, this moment was not meant for them. It may have worked out that way, but Nick and Tiana still believed this to be their fight.

"Will you two be silent! This is our fight with Leon!" they shouted, dashing forward to prove their point. They locked swords with Leon and summoned a flash of lightning.

"Grk?!" Leon grunted.

"Combining a sword and a staff sure makes for a useful weapon... You're more than welcome to try brushing us off, but we have plenty of cards left to play."

Smoke emitted from Leon's body. The white knight had used a powerful Lightning Burst at close range, horribly burning the tigerian's arms. It was significantly stronger than the Lightning Burst that Tiana had cast earlier, and it successfully knocked Leon back.

"Tch... You already used that one. That just improved my defense even more," Leon said. His burned skin peeled off, revealing brand-

new skin underneath. His body's ability to heal itself had clearly gotten faster.

The white knight didn't falter as they casually initiated their next attack. "“Oh, we know. That was just a distraction.”" Leon looked around to see multiple ice spears floating above and behind him, just before they pierced him in several places.

“How do you like that!” the white knight taunted.

“Nice move... But I can fix him as many times as I need,” the Sword of Ruin said. It shone once again and restored Leon's body to full health. That wasn't all—Leon also grew noticeably in size. The sword had simultaneously healed him and increased his strength.

“Good to know. Let's see how you handle this... *Ice Shield*.”

The white knight's voice had become somewhat masculine. Leon noticed the subtle change and looked at them suspiciously. That wasn't nearly as strange as what the knight did next—they dropped the Ice Shield they'd just produced onto the floor and stepped on it.

“Do you think this is some kinda game?” Leon asked angrily.

“Sure. Isn't a casino the perfect place for having some fun?”

“Don't screw with me... Huh?”

Leon noticed a change in their surroundings. The Ice Shields that had been positioned in a square around them now formed a ring. Various chairs and tables were also frozen within the ice.

“All right, Leon... Are you a fan of sledding?” the white knight asked, before leaning on the Ice Shield and beginning to sled around the giant ring of ice. They used the frozen tables as ramps and circled around Leon at rapid and abnormal speeds.

“You're too slow, Leon!”

They harassed Leon with attacks as they sledded around him. They slashed at him when he couldn't see them, confused him with Icicle Dance when he could, and incessantly fired Ice Spears all the while. The fight was turning in the white knight's favor.

Unfortunately, Leon was strong enough to pulverize the ice and put an end to the sledding in moments.

“Take this seriously, you piece of shit!” he yelled. He thrashed about and started to destroy the frozen tables and the ice wall, disturbing the smoothness of the ice and limiting the surface area the white knight had to sled on. “Eat this!”

“Oof!”

Leon kicked the white knight, knocking them backward and crashing into the ice wall they'd created. He pursued them, then swung the Sword of Ruin down and cut the white knight's body clean in two.

“...Nice dodge,” Leon grumbled.

What Leon thought was the white knight turned out to be a

virtual image. The white knight had created a sleek piece of ice right in front of them to serve as a mirror and produce an optical illusion.

“I really shouldn’t try things I haven’t practiced first... Let’s get back to magic,” the white knight said, their voice becoming feminine again. Nick and Tiana were alternating main control over the body.

“Hmph! We may have gotten off to a slow start, but I memorized every attack you just used! They will not work again! You are incapable of defeating us! You have had your fun!” the Sword of Ruin declared.

““Actually, we have three ways of defeating you.””

“...Huh?”

“The simplest way to end this would be to break you. We could also just encase you in ice without the need to hurt you.””

“...Ha, I know you are bluffing. I hadn’t taken you for a coward. If you can really end this so quickly, what is stopping you?”

The Sword of Ruin felt a pang of fear but quickly calmed itself down. The white knight was likely just trying to intimidate it—if their utter composure was indeed false.

““You’re a holy sword, right? I’d like to study you later, and breaking you would make that more trouble than it’s worth. Also, Leon’s not done paying back his victims. It would suck for everyone if he died before all his confiscated possessions were even appraised. That leaves me with the third option...”” The white knight smiled alluringly and picked something up from the ground. ““I’ll make you surrender in the gentlest way I can.””

The item they picked up was a staple of casinos—a deck of cards.

The white knight smiled boldly as they fiddled with the cards in their hands.

“Ha, what do you mean to do with those scraps of paper?” the Sword of Ruin scoffed.

““You’d be surprised by how useful these are,”” the white knight answered.

“Don’t make me laugh! Leon!”

Leon answered his sword’s call and swung the golden blade at the white knight.

“Yaaaaah!”

““We have you cornered. Ice Age prevents the use of all fire spells that don’t match it in strength. You have no way of melting this ice.””

The white knight shot a number of Ice Spears at the charging Leon.

“Remain vigilant, you fools!” the Sword of Bonds admonished.

Just then, the Sword of Ruin’s light grew even brighter, reminiscent of an ominous full moon. “Make full use of my blessing,

Leon!"

"You got it!"

"What the—?!!"

Crustacean-like shells grew to cover Leon's arms, legs, and chest, and the fur on the rest of his body turned white. He looked like a polar bear wearing golden armor. Each transformation pushed his appearance farther away from humanity.

"You can now move without difficulty in the extreme cold and use your armor to defend yourself from the spears of ice. I would like to make a few more adjustments...but this will do for breaking the ice without fire magic," the Sword of Ruin explained.

"Die!" the beastlike Leon yelled, beginning a ferocious assault. He crushed the Ice Shields the white knight created as if they were sugar sculptures as he closed in on them.

"Dammit...!"

"I don't know what it is you were planning, but it looks like we foiled it," the Sword of Ruin said confidently.

"Yeah, what are you doing?!" the Sword of Bonds shouted.

The white knight locked swords with Leon, sending the cards they were holding flying around them. Leon used his giant body to push the white knight back slowly but steadily. The Sword of Bonds groaned.

"The Sword of Evolution's wielder evolves when bathed in its light...though it doesn't appear as if they have much choice in the matter. Your blessing is a dangerous one."

"Do not make it sound as if I force my power upon my wielder. I only provide them with what they need to survive. If one is stabbed with a sword, I give them thicker flesh that can repel blades. If one is exposed to frigid temperatures, I give them a body that can fully function in the cold. What is that if not a blessing?" the Sword of Ruin argued.

"You are only using your power as bait to gain control of your user! What is with that misshapen body anyway?! You're mixing different animals together with no rhyme or reason!"

"Says the sword who is only capable of combining people. It is foolish to think you can defeat us with nothing but superior magic."

"Excuse me?!"

The white knight laughed fearlessly in response to their quarrel. "Don't bother, Bond. It knows it has no argument... There!" They threw a card they still had in their hands at Leon. The cold air and ice acted as an adhesive, causing it to stick to Leon's head over his eyes.

"Grr... You dirty little...," Leon growled.

"No such thing as playing dirty when your life's on the line!" the knight responded.

They backed away from Leon while he was blinded, then kicked a sofa into the air and slashed it apart. Cotton fluttered down through the air like snow.

“What the hell was the point of that? Stop messing around!” Leon yelled, tearing the card off his face and glaring at his opponent intimidatingly. The white knight paid no attention to him as they pulled cotton out of the torn sofa.

“Grk... This is bad! Defend yourself, Leon!” the Sword of Ruin commanded.

““Let’s see you try.””

The knight attacked Leon with the same spears of ice they had been using the whole fight. The only thing that differentiated them now was that they were filled with cotton. However...

“Gaaaaah?!”

...Unlike the cottonless spears, they easily pierced through the shells on Leon’s arms. Fresh blood dripped from the wounds.

“I don’t know the science behind it, but ice is extremely hard when it’s full of cotton. You can’t even break it with a hammer. Have you ever heard of that before?”

Ice with cotton inside is surprisingly hard due to the cotton fibers intertwining with the water molecules during the freezing process. The white knight’s Ice Spear spell also used mana to maintain the ice’s solidity and frigid temperature. That synergy gave the spears the strength to pierce through steel.

“Tch... I will not lose to barbarians surviving on remnants of the ancient civilization...” the Sword of Ruin groaned in frustration.

The Sword of Bonds laughed mockingly. “Oh dear. That disdain for others always tends to get you in trouble.”

“Silence! Your need to rely on cheap tricks involving cards and cotton is proof of your weakness! Grow stronger, Leon! Stronger!”

The Sword of Ruin shone again with its bewitching light. Leon bellowed, bracing himself for another brutal evolution. But it didn’t work as expected.

“Hmm...? Leon, what is that on your back?” the Sword of Ruin asked.

“Grrrr...!” Leon growled.

There was a card on his back. It was far from the only one on his body—the entire deck the white knight had tossed into the air when they locked swords had stuck to him and frozen in his fur.

“Rooooaaarrrr!”

Leon, however, ignored his sword’s words and charged toward the white knight. He swung the blade ferociously.

“For the love of... Leon, listen to me! We need to figure out what they’re— Oh no, did I increase your aggression too far?!” The Sword

of Ruin was panicking.

““Whoa there!”” the knight said, sidestepping Leon’s determined swing. They then created an Ice Shield full of cotton to block his attack.

“Shit! You’re not getting away!” Leon roared.

““You’re the one who should be thinking of escaping.”” The white knight clearly did not intend to run. ““*Leaf Blower*,”” they whispered.

Leaf Blower was the most elementary of wind spells, strong enough only to kick up fallen leaves or dust. It was perfect for picking up the cards still scattered around them on the floor.

“Wh-what are you plotting...?” the Sword of Ruin asked.

The white knight guided the additional cards to stick onto Leon’s body. He was now entirely covered in them.

““Hardening his skin as much as you did backfired. You made him impenetrable, but you also dulled his sense of touch,”” the white knight claimed.

“Urgh... Wh-what the hell...?” Leon shouted.

“H-hey! Leon! What’s wrong?!” the Sword of Ruin asked.

Leon’s movement slowed with each card that stuck to him. It was like his strength was being sapped.

““You called yourself the ‘Sword of Ruin,’ right? And your ability to meddle with your wielder’s body is called ‘Evolution’?””

“Y-yes, that is right,” the Sword of Ruin answered.

““Leon evolved every time your blade shone. That means the light itself is the source of your power. Correct?””

“Wh-what is your point...?”

““What happens if the light can’t reach your target’s body?””

“Ah,” the Sword of Ruin gasped. “N-no, wait! There is no way measly paper should be able to obstruct mana-infused light!”

““Normally you’d be right, but this is a casino. They use special paper and ink to prevent their guests from cheating. These cards are made to repel mana.””

“Wh-what?!” the Sword of Ruin cried, stunned. “Why would you waste such valuable material on a lowly pastime like gambling?! Anti-magic paint was a luxury item in the time of the ancient civilization! Actually, why do gambling parlors exist in the first place?! Don’t you feel guilty at the immorality of it all?!”

““Is the sword who manipulates people and drives them mad really about to give us a lecture on ethics?”” the white knight said in disbelief.

“We holy swords were installed with a code of ethics. Unless we convince our wielder to bring us along, we cannot enter shady establishments such as casinos and brothels. That could explain its surprising naïveté,” the Sword of Bonds muttered with a sigh.



“Wh-who are you calling naive...? No one insults me and gets away with it!” the Sword of Ruin raged. It shone brightly, but not only did Leon not respond, his body shrank. He was no longer a savage beast—he was simply Leon the tigerian.

““Take this!”” the white knight shouted, dashing toward the weakened Leon and swinging their sword up from below. They struck the Sword of Ruin’s guard, knocking it up into the air.

““Ice Coffin.””

“Gaaaaah?!”

The white knight chanted a spell and encased the Sword of Ruin in ice. It was a spell that used ice and mana to seal the target. Just like Ice Age, this was a difficult spell that required a ceremony performed by multiple people to cast, but they did it by themselves instantaneously.

““We’re done here.””

“Y-yes. Honestly, I wasn’t sure you would be able to do it,” the Sword of Bonds said in admiration.

““Really? It didn’t seem very intelligent for an artifact.””

“Don’t say that... The Sword of Ruin is similar to me in that it is largely ignorant of the world outside of its research facility. The only combat experience we ever received was on testing grounds. Also...”

““Yeah?””

“The strength of a sword is important, but clearly not as important as the wielder’s.”

““That’s for sure.””

After the Battle



After defeating Leon and putting an end to his rampage through the casino, Nick and Tiana decided to leave him to the Sun Knights who rushed to the scene. They ran like the wind, knowing that their identities as well as their possession of a holy sword would be exposed if they were interrogated in their Union state. Fortunately, the Sun Knights had their hands full and didn't pursue the two.

Leon had charged down the roads like a runaway bull in his pursuit of Nick, leaving victims and chaos in his wake, which aided Nick and Tiana in their escape. The casino was far from the only place that was in bad shape. As such, the Sun Knights' first priority was capturing Leon and returning him to his prison cell. The question of who'd defeated him and how was put off, and the longer they waited, the harder the truth would be to find.

Once the excitement had calmed down, Nick headed to the Sun Knight prison.

"You're here for a visit, right? Are you alone?" a knight asked.

"Yep," Nick responded.

The prison was always strict with visitors. Adventurers received especially harsh treatment, and Nick could feel sharp glares on his back as he walked through the halls. There were many ill-bred adventurers, but that wasn't the only reason the Sun Knights didn't like them—some made a living by arresting criminals and pursuing bounties, beating the knights at their own game. This resulted in a permanent cold war between the Adventurers Guild and the Sun Knights.

"Listen up. Leon has not had an official trial yet. We're giving you special permission to visit him 'cause you found evidence of his fraudulent activities, but you try anything to interfere with the legal

process and I'll throw you out in a heartbeat. Understood?" the knight warned. The Sun Knights were always threatening adventurers in this manner.

"I'll be quick," Nick said.

"I'm gonna observe your meeting. The moment you look like you're about to pull something—"

"I get the idea." Nick slipped a silver coin into the knight's sleeve.

"...Well, the Sun Knight's first duty is to serve the people. I'll extend your time. But don't leave your seat."

"I just want you to give us some space."

"Very well."

He accepted the bribe easily. Nick couldn't see the man's expression through the visor of his helmet, but he didn't seem like a particularly honorable knight. He led Nick down a stone hallway. It was a gloomy, humid place. The knight opened a number of locked doors, creating a clanging echo each time.

"This is it."

Nick was shown into an oppressive room with a low ceiling. The cell was stereotypical for a jail—there were six of them, separated by iron bars and stone walls. Only one of the cells was occupied.

"The hell are you doin' here?"

"Hey. You look well."

"Ha, gimme a break. Do you see this place?"

The imprisoned man was Leon. After letting Nick in, the knight remained at the door, which was far enough away to be unable to hear them. The silver coin was all it took for him to bend the rules a little.

"...So what do you want? Did you come to gawk at the man who lost to the same opponent twice in a row?" Leon asked self-deprecatingly.

"Yeah, I wanted to see you," Nick replied.

"Why the hell... Well, feast your eyes. Get outta here once you've had your fill." Leon sighed.

Despite his words, Nick didn't sense any of the anger Leon had displayed the last time he saw him. It was strange. Nick gave him a long, hard look.

"...Did you really just come to see my face?" Leon asked.

"N-no, I'm just surprised. I expected you to have nastier things to say to me."

"Use your brain, idiot. You think I wanna do anythin' to make my treatment here worse?"

"I guess that makes sense..." Nick scratched his head, unsure how to react. "Anyway, I came here to ask you a question... But I wanna explain what happened after the incident first."

"All right."

"The casino received a good amount of structural damage. There were plenty of injuries, but no one died. The knights who were here when you broke out of jail were hurt the worst."

"Hmm."

"...You did a good job of holding back. Was that intentional? Did you retain just enough of your sanity to avoid killing anyone?"

"Beats me."

"Claudine and Begg are still in jail. They're guilty of fraud, extortion, and more, so I'm sure they'll be locked up for a while."

"A good bet."

"We sealed the Sword of Ruin...er, Evolution. No one knows where it is but us," Nick said at a near whisper. Leon's blank expression finally changed.

"...So that blond woman *was* you. Since when were you a cross-dresser?" he asked.

"It's something I've found comfort in recently. Everyone needs a way to relieve stress."

"..."

Leon stared at Nick.

"I'm joking, I'm joking."

"Tch... Anyway, guess you had a holy sword, too."

"Yep."

"Why're you admitting this to me?"

"Why have you stayed quiet? You clearly already knew that was me."

"...No reason. I just didn't want to see you all treated as heroes," Leon muttered bitterly.

"Eh, that works for me."

"I'll gladly give you away if it's supposed to be a secret."

"Do that, and you'll just have to live with the knowledge that I've become the hero of Labyrinth City."

That was a bluff. It would be a real problem for the Survivors if Leon talked. Nick had figured he realized the identity of the white knight, and finding out what he intended to do with that knowledge was one of his reasons for this visit. He was relieved that Leon seemed inclined to keep it to himself.

"You really do piss me off, Nick."

"That goes both ways... On to the main thing I wanna discuss."

"What's that?"

"Where did you find that sword?"

"Oh, come on. You really think I'd tell you that?"

"I thought you might react that way." Nick sighed. He pulled a piece of paper out of his pocket.

“...What’re you doing?” Leon asked.

“This is a lawyer’s business card. He has lots of experience working with thugs and other shady characters,” Nick answered.

“I know what it is.”

“I’ll introduce you if you answer my question.”

Leon fell silent for a few minutes. “What’re you gonna do if I tell you?” he finally asked.

“Nothing really. Bond—my holy sword—wants to do an investigation. He won’t shut up about how he doesn’t want relics of the ancient civilization to fall into the wrong hands,” Nick responded.

“Doesn’t sound like you care that much.”

“One annoying talking sword is enough for me.”

“...Gimme that.”

“Here you go. I’m not paying for this, by the way. I’m sure you’ve got the money.” Nick tossed Leon the card. The tigerian inspected it and put it in his pocket. “And don’t get your hopes up. You have no chance of being exonerated. You’re gonna be locked up for years.”

“I’m well aware... I found the Sword of Ruin on the bottom floor of the Mechanical Moon Facility.”

“That’s a B-rank labyrinth, isn’t it?”

“Yep... It’s a labyrinth my old party, the Silver Tiger Troop, spent a lotta time in. It was the only labyrinth we ever fully conquered. You can see what we found and how we got through it in the guild’s records. It has been completely mapped out, though, so there aren’t any artifacts left.”

“Got it.”

“What’d you do with the Sword of Evolution, Nick?”

“We sealed it. I won’t tell you where.”

“Huh.”

“You got a problem with that?”

Leon closed his eyes and shook his head. “No, that’s good. Don’t tell anyone about it. Not the guild, not the Sun Knights, no one. I’ll stay silent about your holy sword, too.”

“You’re being surprisingly nice.”

“I’m not all bad. To be honest with you, I feel relieved. Hidin’ the Sword of Ruin really weighed on me. I thought of it as an ace up my sleeve I could use in case of an emergency, but I knew how dangerous it was. I’m done stirrin’ up trouble. I think spendin’ a few years here eatin’ their crappy food might not be so bad for me,” Leon said nonchalantly, his expression oddly peaceful.

Nick was genuinely surprised. He didn’t expect Leon to be willing to talk at all.

“You’ve changed,” he commented.

“I have somethin’ serious to tell you, Nick. Listen up,” Leon said,

taking on a grave tone. Nick was rendered speechless by his shift in attitude. “There’s a faction in Labyrinth City goin’ after ancient relics. They’re skilled enough to catch advanced adventurers off guard, and they’ll stop at nothin’ to accomplish their goals... Thinkin’ back, they probably caused the collapse of the Silver Tiger Troop.”

“Huh? Where’s this coming from?” Nick asked, startled by the sudden change in topic.

“The Silver Tiger Troop obtained a hefty collection of artifacts from the Mechanical Moon Facility. Once the news got out, we were swamped with requests from merchants and nobles lookin’ to buy them. Eventually, someone convinced one of my party members to betray us and sell an artifact on the black market... I had a lot of time to think about this, and I don’t think getting that item on the black market was their end goal. I think they were tryin’ to break apart our party so they could take our entire collection.”

“Hold on, Leon. What are you getting at?”

“Read the Silver Tiger Troop’s files at the guild. It won’t take you long to understand.”

“O-okay.”

“Once the Iron Tiger Troop found its footing and I got some money saved up, I did a reinvestigation. The person who fooled my old party member was a blond-haired man who wields a longsword. I never figured out his real name, but...it seems he was callin’ himself ‘Callios.’”

“What’re you—?”

“Anyway, Nick. It’s the right call to keep your holy sword a secret. Don’t let anyone find out about it. They *will* come after you. If you don’t wanna keep hiding that fact, become strong enough to fight them off. You’re gonna need more than physical strength—these people have influence and money.”

“Tell me more about them. You said that man’s name was Callios, right?”

“I’d love to, but...” Leon jerked his chin toward the door behind Nick. “We’re outta time.”

“...Oh, shoot.”

“Bring me a snack next time you visit. Not alcohol, though—I’d love to have a cigarette or some candy. The food here is awful.”

“You’re gonna have to put up with it. I thought you said this place was gonna be good for you.”

“S-sure, but...I’m tellin’ you, man, the food *sucks*.”

“All right, all right.”

Nick clicked his tongue as he stood up. He accomplished his goal for this visit, but he had been saddled with another problem that needed solving. He sighed heavily and left the prison.

"I'm back!" Nick announced after letting himself into Tiana's apartment.

"How many times do I have to tell you, you can't just barge in here like you own the place," Tiana complained. Bond, Zem, and Karan all giggled.

"We could rent some kinda conference room. Or we could also get a large apartment or a small house as a place to meet up and store our things," Nick said, but that did nothing to improve Tiana's mood.

"I don't want to have to spend party funds on rent, either! We can just keep using my place!"

"That's our best option."

"I expect a thank-you at least."

"All right, all right. Thank you."

"That's more like it." Tiana crossed her arms haughtily and smiled.

"So, Nick. How did it go?" Bond asked.

The other Survivors had been waiting for Nick in Tiana's apartment. There was a good chance Nick's meeting with Leon would affect their plans going forward.

Nick looked at Bond dubiously. "You already know, Bond. I told you using Telepathy," he said.

"Relaying the message would have been tiresome, so I kept it to myself. I want you to tell everyone."

"Hey."

They all glared at Bond. He just laughed, unperturbed.

"What is the matter? It is best to hear important information such as this firsthand. And..." He trailed off, looking at Nick meaningfully. Nick supposed he was right in that he should share this with the group directly. Making Bond explain everything Leon said would be a big ask.

"...Fine. First off, he hasn't given us away. I was able to buy him off, too."

"That is good to hear," Zem said, breathing a sigh of relief.

"Here's the thing, though..." Nick paused, hesitant to continue. He glanced toward Karan.

"What's wrong? Are you hungry?" Karan asked. She was munching on a peeled orange. At this time of year, there was an abundance of citrus fruit on the market. There was a pile of oranges on the table; Karan must have bought them in bulk.

"We can eat as we talk. I've got something you need to hear," Nick answered.

"O-okay..." Karan agreed uneasily.

Nick began to explain everything Leon had told him.

Slowly, Karan's warm expression faded as she listened.

“To sum it up: First, he told us to be careful of thieves going after artifacts. And second...”

Nick looked at Karan. She had that stern expression on her face that she wore when she was confronting a strong enemy. She chewed, swallowed, and spoke.

“Nick.”

“What?”

“Can you wait until I’m done eating before you stare at me like that?”

“Sorry.”

Karan blushed slightly. “So...did he say something about Callios?” she muttered.

Nick nodded.

Callios was the name of the leader of the adventurer’s party that had attempted to sacrifice Karan at the bottom of a labyrinth, and Leon’s description matched the Callios she knew. She wanted to track him down and recover the valuable dragon king gem he stole.

“Yeah. It seems he had been active in Labyrinth City for a number of years,” Nick answered.

“And he stole an artifact from Leon?”

“Apparently.”

“Do you really think he would leave Labyrinth City because he made a little money or stole something valuable?”

The man who called himself Callios stole an important magic item from the Silver Tiger Troop, yet years later he was still preying on victims like Karan. If that was true, she might be right.

“I know what you’re trying to say, Karan. But we don’t have any concrete information on his current whereabouts. So...”

“I know. Leon’s artifact was stolen years ago, after all. It could’ve been a different person with the same name. If it was my Callios, that would mean he’s used the same fake name since then. That would be a little strange.” Karan was handling this more calmly than Nick had expected. She was clearly trying to memorize everything he said, but she didn’t look angry or impatient. “I’m just glad I have more clues to go on, though. Thanks, Nick,” she said.

“N-no problem,” Nick responded. It was his turn to blush. “... Anyway, I’m gonna look into the Silver Tiger Troop. If Leon’s right that having an artifact is enough to put us in danger, we need to take this seriously.”

“Yes, we must brace ourselves,” Bond said. Everyone glared at him again. “C-come now! I am a victim here, too! I was sealed for centuries. I could not have known there were thieves pursuing artifacts!”

“Show some responsibility, then. You’re the reason we’re in this

situation,” Nick reprimanded.

“I am going to give all the help you need. You have absolutely nothing to fear,” Bond claimed, puffing his chest out proudly.

Nick rolled his eyes. “Anyway. Let’s proceed with caution, Karan,” he warned.

“You don’t need to worry about me, Nick. Is my reaction really that surprising?” Karan asked sullenly.

“No, it’s just... No offense, but I half expected you to rush out of the apartment and start looking for him right away.”

“Jerk.” Karan chuckled an orange at Nick, and he caught it with his right hand. “...I feel like I learned something from our duel against Leon and Claudine.”

“What’s that?”

“That physical strength isn’t the only way to solve a problem.”

“Leon and I kinda did just punch the shit out of each other, though. One of us could’ve easily died the other day, too.”

“You know what I mean!”

“Sorry, I’m joking.”

“Geez. You have the strangest sense of humor...” Karan cleared her throat. “Doing research, forming a plan, and making sure there are no holes in it... I’ve never done that kind of thing before. I’m sure that all comes naturally to smart people.”

“Karan...”

“That’s too complicated for me to handle still. Not alone, at least. I think I’ll need those kinds of skills to find Callios and get my treasure back. That’s why this was a good experience for me.”

“In more ways than one.”

“It really was! Solving all those math problems was exhausting! And you’re *still* giving me homework, even though the duel is over!”

“Daily practice is the only way to improve,” Nick said with a grin. Despite her complaints, Karan was seriously applying herself. Tiana patted her head in praise. That sight filled Nick’s heart with warmth.

Nick didn’t feel any relief or joy at defeating Leon and Claudine. He felt as if a lump had been removed from his throat, but no more. It should have been something to celebrate, but the incident had left a bad taste in his mouth. Still, that was vanishing as he watched Karan. It was clear how hard she was working and how much she had grown.

“...Why is everyone smiling?” Karan asked, embarrassed.

“Don’t worry about it,” Nick said. He realized Tiana, Zem, and Bond were smiling just like him.

“D-don’t look at me like that! Let’s change the subject!” Karan shouted.

“Okay.”

“I’m tired of shutting myself in my room and studying! Now that

things have calmed down, I want to go out!”

The other four nodded in agreement with her feelings. They had all refrained from spending too much time on their hobbies during the conflict with Leon. Nick hadn’t been to an idol concert in a while.

“...Me too. I wanted to relieve stress at the casino, but that didn’t work out,” Tiana said.

“Yes, I believe we should take this chance to relax,” Zem said.

“Staying inside all day is bad for your health,” Bond added.

The three of them smiled cheerfully.

“See? Sit down and relax, Nick. Aren’t you tired?” Karan asked.

“Would you like me to make you some tea?” Zem offered.

“Zem, why do you think you can just use my teapot?” Tiana asked.

“Oh, do you not want me to? I have some good medicinal tea.”

“No, I guess it’s fine...,” Tiana replied. “Is medicinal tea even good?”

“Man, your apartment’s getting kinda cramped, Tiana,” Nick commented.

“There are magic texts and utensils everywhere. It has become quite a mess,” Bond agreed.

“Hey, that’s against the rules! We’re not supposed to interfere with each other’s private lives!” Tiana protested.

“Oh, you’re right,” said Nick. “My bad.”

“I believe you were supposed to offer to help clean there,” Bond said.

“My apartment is *fine*!”

Zem handed Nick a cup of tea, and he took a sip. The refreshing taste hit the spot.

The Worries of an Idol Stan



“Haah...” Nick sighed, sounding stressed and exhausted.

“This incident was a resounding success, Nick,” Zem said.

“...Yeah,” Nick responded.

“The Adventurers Guild gave us a reward, and you will get your stolen money back as soon as the judicial process is complete. You even settled matters with your ex-girlfriend and her partners in crime.”

“Yep, I did. Oh, thanks for that lawyer’s business card. Leon wouldn’t have talked without it.”

“You are most welcome.”

“His name is Redd, right? Where’d you meet him?”

The business card Nick had given Leon had SOUTH GATE LAW FIRM. REDD CHAMBERS, ATTORNEY AT LAW written on it. Nick thought his name sounded cool. He pictured him as a tough, handsome man.

“Women who work in the nightlife district tend to like to befriend a few lawyers and healers. I have met quite a few lawyers in my time here.”

“Oh, nice. That could come in handy.”

“May I ask what has you in such an anxious mood?”

Nick put a hand to his forehead and sighed again. “...I have two reasons.”

“Do you mind sharing?”

“Sure. First of all...”

“Yes?”

“I have a hard time with hostess clubs. They make me uncomfortable.”

“Okay.”

“And second... It was a bit of a shock to discover all the

employees here are cross-dressing men.”

Among the many bars in Labyrinth City, Anemone Alehouse was one of the most unconventional. Nick and Zem were sitting at the counter.

“Oh, drat. Do you dislike this kind of establishment?” Zem asked.

“No, not necessarily... Though I haven’t really had a chance to form an opinion.” Nick glanced behind the counter. There were three men standing there—one who was so beautiful that Nick couldn’t see him as a man, one who appeared mysteriously androgynous, and another who had paid close attention to his outfit and nothing else.

“What? Do you have something to say?”

“Zemmy, your friend is so callous!”

“Look at how cute he is, though. How old are you?”

“Ah-ha-ha, go easy on him. This is his first time here,” Zem said in response to the employees’ teasing. He wasn’t fazed by this place at all. His experience in the red-light district was more than apparent.

“Anyway, can I get a refill? And something to eat?” Nick asked.

““““Sure thing!”””” the employees responded cheerfully. Their voices were all husky but so feminine as to make it believable they were just women with slightly deep voices. *They must practice their pitch*, Nick thought.

“Oh yeah, Leon just asked me if I’m into cross-dressing,” he recalled.

“Would you like to try? The employees here would gladly lend you a makeup kit,” Zem said.

Nick felt stares and looked up to see the men behind the counter looking at him with great interest.

“...How about it?” one of them asked.

“Not today,” Nick replied.

“Aw, that’s a shame. Let me know if you have a change of heart, hon.” The employee laughed and set down a plate in front of Nick.

It was a stew consisting of passenger pigeon meat, onions, and broad beans seasoned with tomatoes and chili peppers. This dish had come from abroad over a century ago and had become a staple in Labyrinth City. Many who mistook it as local cuisine called it Labyrinth Stew or Labyrinth Chicken, and the fact that it was from another country was all but forgotten.

Nick often made it with wild birds they caught when they camped for their adventures. He used the recipe he learned from his parents when he was young. His party members liked it, and Tiana was fond of bringing the leftovers home to eat later.

“Hmm...this is pretty good,” Nick said.

“Isn’t it, though?”

“I’m so happy you like it!”

The employees voiced their joy with sugary voices.

“Don’t get me wrong, though. My version is better,” Nick added.

“Why do you have to make it a competition, Nick?” Zem asked.

“Sorry, can’t help it.” It truly was delicious. It was too spicy to eat regularly, but it made for an enjoyable meal at a bar. “You know, this place is nice once you get used to it,” Nick muttered.

The employees took great interest in Nick as a first-time customer, but they were not being pushy with him. Many hostess clubs tended to be predatory and have the girls pressure the customers into letting them serve them; that was true of the hostess clubs Nick had been brought to, at least. This bar gave the customers space to enjoy themselves in their own way. It was surprisingly comfortable.

“Isn’t it? It is quite relaxing,” Zem agreed.

“I thought you preferred restaurants with female servers,” Nick said.

The former priest smiled. “To be perfectly honest, women scare me.”

“...Oh yeah. You’re mostly scared of girls in their early teens, right?”

Nick remembered Zem’s story well. A young girl had ruined his life by spreading a lie through his sanctuary that he’d raped her—he couldn’t forget that if he tried.

“What I feel toward young girls is more than fear—it is trauma. And that is true of women in general.”

“Oh, okay.”

Nick was surprised, but it made sense. Zem went to hostess clubs and other restaurants with waitresses often. A female had ruined his life, while another had saved him from the brink of despair. It would be easier for him if only one of the two had been true, but both happening in rapid succession gave him a feeling of powerlessness around women that he couldn’t escape. Despite his fear, he was doing his best to enjoy the presence of women and become comfortable around them. Nick figured he went to hostess clubs for the thrill of overcoming that fear.

“You’re right. Women are terrifying,” one of the employees said.

“We may have been born male, but we’re women at heart. Tee-hee,” another added.

“There’s nothing wrong with you all being women at heart. I mean, some creatures are genderless. Some are male and female at the same time. It’s up to you to decide who you truly are,” Nick said. The employees looked at him wide-eyed. “Wh-what is it?”

“...I see why Zemmy brought you here. You have promise, Nick. Here’s my business card,” said the employee who looked mysteriously androgynous. He sat down next to Nick, produced a business card

from his pocket and kissed it, leaving a bright red kiss mark. He then tossed it at Nick.

"I'm not making any promises about becoming a regular, though..."

"Come now. We're going to be working together, you know?"

"Whuh?" Unsure what he meant, Nick looked down at the business card. He was flabbergasted by what he saw. "You're a lawyer?! Wait, don't tell me..."

The business card said, SOUTH GATE LAW FIRM. REDD CHAMBERS, ATTORNEY AT LAW.

"That's right. I'll be defending Leon. I look forward to your assistance with this case," Redd said with a wink.

"Wow." Nick was stunned and unsure of what to say. "...Uh, this card says, SOUTH GATE LAW FIRM."

"Oh, this is a two-story building. The first floor is a bar, and the second is a law firm," Redd explained.

"Is that allowed?!" Nick exclaimed.

"I have a permit, so it's perfectly fine," Redd said, showing his collar. There was a badge sewn onto it, designed after a balance scale. Only lawyers certified by the kingdom could wear it. "I am defending Leon, but I plan on having his victims be reimbursed in full. Let's aim for a win-win outcome."

"S-sounds good," Nick responded.

"You can count on me. The trial isn't for some time, though. We'll discuss the details at a later date. Just enjoy yourself for today," Redd said before returning to the other side of the counter. Nick watched him go in stunned silence.

"Are you surprised?" Zem asked.

"Of course I am... I totally forgot what we were talking about," Nick said.

"Hmm... Oh, yes. We were discussing my fear of women."

"You know, I think I agree with you, Zem. Women *are* scary. And men, too."

"You are right about that."

"You're pretty scary yourself, Zem."

"I am? How so?"

"You've saved a lot of people in your life with your treatment. Lawyers help a lot of people, too. There's no way a person can have that much power and not frighten others."

Zem looked hurt by Nick's words. "D-do I really scare people?"

"Think about the people you heal and give medicine to. They don't want to anger you because they're afraid of getting rejected. You're their only source for treatment—if you cut them off, they're toast."

“No, I would never think like that when...,” Zem began, but stopped. There was no way for his patients to know his true intentions. What’s more, he had been using his healing talents for his own benefit since coming to Labyrinth City. He had even used them to threaten wicked hostess clubs that tried to swindle their customers. “...I see your point. People with power are frightening and cannot be opposed. No matter how pure of heart they may appear.”

There was no guarantee they would never have a change of heart. Neither Zem nor Nick voiced that possibility.

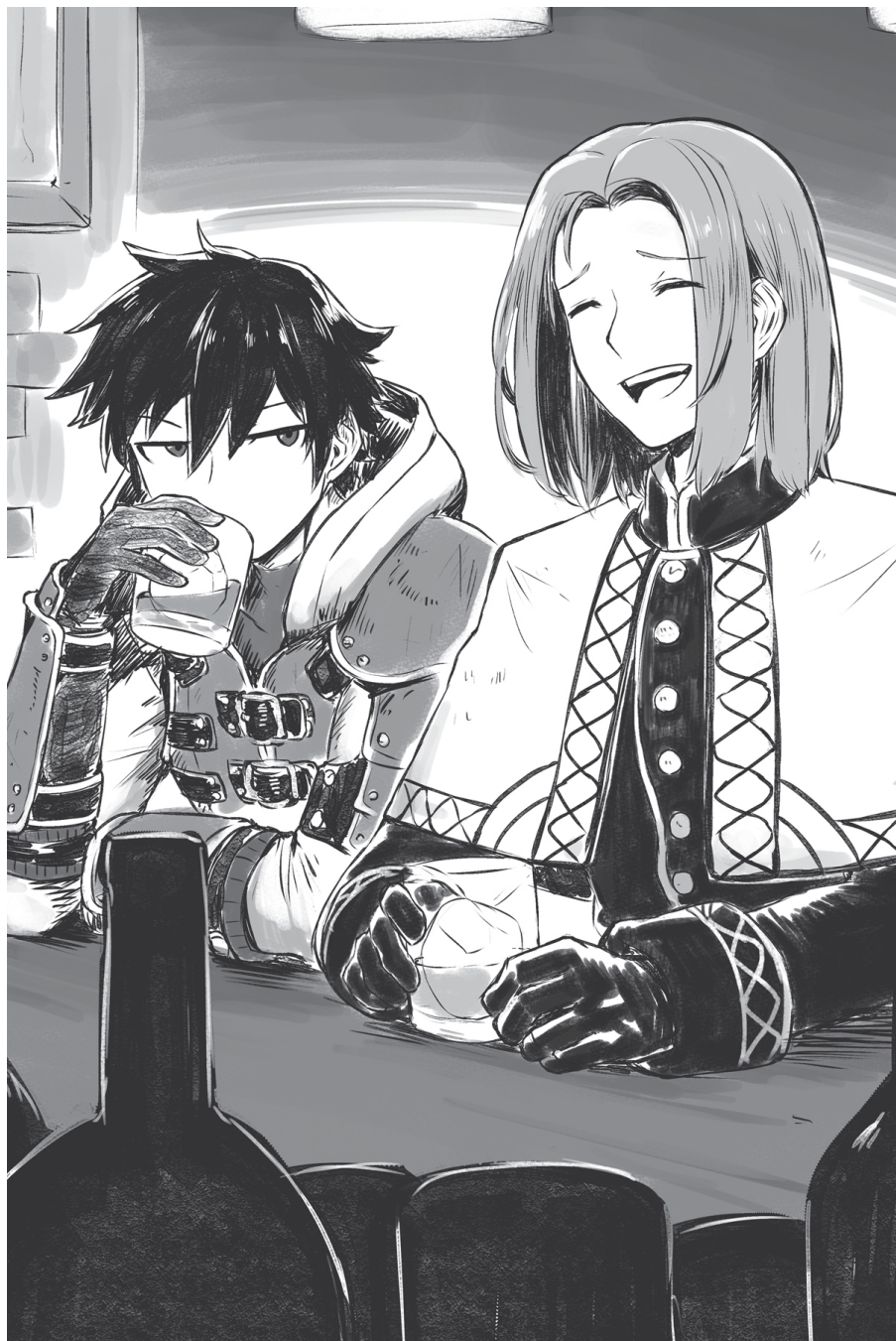
“It is impressive you are able to think that way, Nick,” Zem said.

“Really?” Nick responded.

“You were swindled, too. By Claudine.”

“Don’t bring that up.” Nick glared at Zem.

“Ha-ha, my apologies,” Zem replied with an awkward laugh.



“Now that I think about it, she and Leon were probably scared of us on some level. That was why they targeted us.”

“...I see.”

“Do you disagree?” Nick asked, and Zem shook his head.

“I cannot say whether that is true. I am sure you know better than me. What I can say is that picking a fight with someone just because they terrify you would not be particularly smart,” he responded.

“You’ve got a point there.”

“On the other hand, speaking to someone who frightens you takes courage. You could consider what they did an unlucky gamble.”

“Gambling sure is scary. I’m sure Tiana would have something to say about that, though.”

“Most likely. At least I was able to get my thoughts in order. It appears as if I have an inclination toward gambling as well, but different from hers.”

“Go easy on the flirting, man,” Nick said, and Zem grinned.

“That is enough about me. I wanted to ask if anything was bothering you.”

“Eh, I’m fine. There’s one thing I’m worried about, but it’s not a big deal.”

“I can tell it is important to you. What is wrong?” Zem urged. Nick made a troubled expression. After a lengthy silence, he forced himself to speak.

“...She’s taking a break.”

“A break? Who?”

“Agate, my favorite idol. She’s taking a hiatus from all idol activities.”

The Decision of Belle Huggins (Agate the Idol)



“How would you like to be an idol?”

Yet another shady customer. I started working at this bar three months ago and thought I had gotten used to handling the difficult ones. That was naive of me. This man looked so suspicious, he made me want to quit my job.

He was a large man dressed all in black. He was bald and had a neatly trimmed beard. Everything about the man’s appearance screamed dangerous. I couldn’t see him working a respectable job—if I had to guess, I’d have said he was an assassin.

“U-umm...I’m sorry, but it’s against the rules for people from other bars to headhunt here.”

“Oh, I see we have a misunderstanding, Belle. I won’t deny that I am recruiting you, but I am not from another bar. Would you mind giving me a few minutes of your time?” he asked.

“Huh...,” I gasped, frightened. He handed me a business card, and I took it without thinking. It said, JEWELRY PRODUCTION PRODUCER—JOSEPH COLEMAN.

“Hey, Belle. How many times do I have to tell you to chase away any weird customers?”

“Ah, s-sorry, Donny!”

Donny appeared from the kitchen. He must have sensed trouble. He probably wanted to go ahead and close the restaurant, but he couldn’t start cleaning up as long as there were customers around. It always put him in a foul mood when customers continued chatting right up until closing time, delaying when he could leave. His irritation was even stronger toward those who came to see me. His

temper wasn't nearly so bad when he first opened the store, though.

I'm Belle Huggins—a singer at this bar and also Donny's girlfriend. I was happy to see him jealous, but there were elements of his behavior I wasn't okay with. It was for his sake that I sang and tried to grow the restaurant's popularity. I wished he would think of protecting me before he got mad at me, but I knew how busy he was.

"So what do you want?" Donny asked the man curtly.

"Apologies for the intrusion. Are you this bar's owner?" the man asked. His apology seemed to improve Donny's mood.

"Yes, but you don't seem like a customer."

"I want to recruit this girl as an idol."

"An idol?"

"That's right. Technically, she will be a candidate for an eventual debut as an idol."

"That sounds interesting," Donny muttered, apparently intrigued. I glared at him to hint not to trust this shady man at his word, but he ignored me. "That's wonderful. This is a chance for you to make it big, Belle. You shouldn't pass this up."

"I've never even seen an idol before," I protested.

"Then how about you consider it after going to one of their concerts?" Donny suggested.

The man in black clothes—Joseph—smiled in response to Donny's advice. "That is a great idea. I would love for you to come to one. How would you like to come backstage after the show? The staff will let you through if you give them my business card."

Joseph forced a concert ticket into my hand along with his business card. He told me that the town hall in the southern side of Labyrinth City held many singing and dancing events, and he pestered me to come while saying that he "respected my intentions." He quickly left the bar after his business was done. Dressed like an assassin with the bearing of a salesman—curious.

Honestly, I didn't expect anything of the event at the time. I was too busy worrying that I was falling into a trap.

"...Hey, Donny. Why were you so eager about his proposal?" I asked him when it was finally time to leave after cleaning the kitchen and closing the shop. I immediately regretted my critical tone, but it was how I felt. It didn't feel good to be treated as expendable when I was working so hard to help the restaurant.

"It'll be fine. Customer traffic isn't bad right now. There have to be better places for you to sing than here," he replied, not picking up on my tone.

"I guess so, but..."

The reason I was working as a waitress and singer here was to

help grow its popularity. I wasn't going to say this out loud, but my singing was well received, and many customers came specifically to see me. I wasn't sure if the bar would be able to survive if I left to become an idol.

"I know how hard you're working to support me. But I opened this bar to serve food and alcohol... I don't want to cheat my way to success."

"Are you calling my help 'cheating'?!"

"Don't get me wrong, *I'm* not saying that. I just hear that from customers sometimes."

"...I don't think it's good to take what customers say at face value."

"Trust me, I know how hard you're working. It's just...I'll never be able to pay you back if I keep relying on you all the time. I want to grow the bar through my own ability."

"Well...if that's what you want, I'll respect your wishes."

He should have just said it outright if he didn't want me around anymore. He should have never asked for my help in the first place if he thought any profit I brought to the bar was "cheating."

Rather than voice my complaints, I gripped the ticket and decided to go to the idol concert. I had no idea how much my life was about to change.

I went to the town hall alone. We couldn't both leave the restaurant, and Donny didn't seem interested in attending. The south side of Labyrinth City wasn't as dangerous as the east side, but it still wasn't a good idea for a girl to walk the streets by herself. I felt anxious and vulnerable and confused by the strange air of excitement around me. It didn't help that the other spectators were all filthy-looking men.

I almost turned around and left multiple times on the way, but I ended up encountering two girls at the venue. I felt like I had been saved. They seemed a little overwhelmed by the atmosphere at the town hall as well, and we hit it off immediately and decided to watch the concert together.

One of the girls had long blond hair and an easygoing manner. "This place is crazy. Can you believe this crowd? I was worried I came to the wrong place at first, so thank you," she said. She was pretty enough to be an idol herself but quite absentminded; I was worried she was going to get abducted if she wasn't careful.

The other one was a cheerful girl with short hair. She looked the most afraid out of all of us when we found her, but joining us seemed to restore her confidence, and she took the lead in our group. "W-well, there's no point in getting all flustered. We were given these tickets, so it would be a waste to leave now," she said. The way she was

constantly trying to encourage us had me a little worried about her, too. She didn't seem like a bad girl, though. She found a nice spot in the venue to protect us from the jostling crowd as we watched the concert.

"Yeah, you're right. We might as well give the concert a chance," I said to convey my thanks to the two. I likely would have lost heart and left if I hadn't met them.

I ended up very glad that I didn't leave. I was enraptured the moment the concert began. The idols shone as they sang. It was scintillating. I had no idea that such an exciting stage existed for singers to perform upon.

I rushed backstage to see Joseph after the show, still flushed from excitement. For some reason, the two girls I was with were allowed entrance as well.

"That was incredible! I was blown away!" I exclaimed.

"It was really fun!"

"Yeah, I loved it!"

The other two girls agreed with flushed faces. Joseph's stern expression relaxed slightly. He studied each of us in turn and spoke slowly.

"I am glad you had a good time. Now...on the topic of becoming idols—"

I interrupted him with a shout. "I would love to be an idol!"

"Wonderful. That's a yes from you. How about you two?" Joseph asked, turning to the other girls.

"I want to be one, too!" the blond-haired girl said.

"I was all in from the start," the short-haired girl claimed.

I looked at them both with surprise. I hadn't realized they had been scouted like me.

"You're both idol candidates, too?" I asked.

"Huh? Did we not tell you?"

"...I thought you would've noticed. You were sitting right next to us."

They were both surprised I didn't realize it, and I looked down, blushing. Joseph spoke again to change the mood.

"Oh yes, I never told you. I invited all three of you. You will be idol trainees together. Let's give this our all," he said.

""""Okay!""""

The next day, I was given the name *Agate*. With my new name came a new life. I started to take vocal training and dance lessons. I even received free soap and perfume.

I became friends with the girls I'd gone to the concert with. The absentminded girl with long hair was named Topaz, and the cheerful

one with short hair was named Amber. My pre-debut training was always with the two of them. I was good at singing but bad at dancing. Amber was the opposite—she was great at dancing. Topaz wasn't particularly good at either, but she had a fervor you never would have expected from her absentminded appearance.

It was a new experience for me. I had gotten into arguments with friends my age before, but never through the pursuit of a shared goal. We pushed each other to dance in sync, to sing energetically, and to learn how to fire up an audience. We strove to be the best we could be.

I had never had female friends like them. My parents had died a few years back, and after being evicted from our rental home, I supported myself by moving from one live-in job to another. I did make friends at those jobs, but we never had a shared goal. We comforted each other by complaining about our work, men, customers, and our own failures, but we didn't spend much time wishing for each other's happiness. Our days were hard and dark; we didn't have the mental leeway to do so.

That was why I came to love Donny. He spoke of his dreams and asked me to help him achieve them. I respected him for trying to find light in the darkness. I worked as hard as I could to support the bar, and no matter how tired I felt, all the exhaustion left my body when he thanked me for my efforts. I had only ever latched on to other people's dreams—it wasn't until I began training as an idol that I realized I could pursue my own.

It wasn't all sunshine and rainbows, of course. Some idols and trainees grew jealous and antagonistic toward me. But that just showed how serious we were in our efforts to reach the stage. The girls didn't just curse their rivals' names in bed at night; they would pick fights and use words that cut like a blade.

I didn't want to lose. That was the first time I realized how competitive I was.

"You haven't been helping out much lately," Donny said.

"S-sorry," I replied.

"No, it's fine. I'm the one who said you didn't have to, and I feel bad for not being able to pay you enough. It's just...I really could use you on the weekends when it gets busy."

"I don't mind that, but... Wait, where's Rose?"

"She quit."

"Huh? Why?"

Rose was a waitress at Donny's bar. We weren't close because our shifts didn't overlap very often, but I thought she was a good worker. Her bright and friendly personality made her a nice fit for serving

customers, and she had worked at the bar since day one. I thought she had an attachment to the place, even if not to Donny's extent.

"...I kinda snapped at her. She was getting greedy."

"Greedy...? Wait, were you paying Rose poorly, too?"

"A-anyway, I'm counting on you!" Donny said evasively before withdrawing to the kitchen.

Looking back, I think we should have discussed the bar's future at that point. I was preoccupied with my idol work and a little too excited to think about anything else. It had been determined that I would open for the popular idol Garnet—who belonged to the same agency—and debut a song. I was concentrating all my efforts into practicing for the event.

Even if the concert hadn't been a factor, though, I was already thinking in a corner of my mind that my help wouldn't change a thing. Donny's customer traffic had only decreased after I stopped singing there regularly. He had apparently hired some girls to fill the hole I had left, but none of them lasted long. I thought his low salaries and the irregularity of his business hours were the biggest reasons the bar was failing, but I didn't say anything. It was clear he wouldn't listen to anything I said. Whenever I asked him about finances, he would just say, "I have a plan," and refuse to give me any details.

So I just devoted myself to my work. Part of the reason I worked so hard on my idol activities was because I didn't want to think about Donny. But whatever my motivation, my performance was well received. Garnet praised me onstage, and a rumor that there was a promising new idol spread among the fans.

Not long afterward, my official debut was set. Topaz and Amber congratulated me. They also admitted their regrets that I had surpassed them. They trained really hard and debuted after me, but I was the first among my contemporaries. If I had been overtaken by one of them, I would've been too jealous to sleep.

But they didn't want me to fail. They didn't curse my success. They might have done so out of my sight, but they both did so much to support me. They gave serious consideration to what I could do to stand out onstage, what I should do with my hair and clothes, and how I could survive as a new idol.

All Donny said was, "Wish I could be so lucky."

Donny's bar grew quieter and quieter. His closing time came earlier in the day, and he took an increasing number of days off.

"Can you lend me a little money?" he asked me one day.

"Is the bar doing that poorly?"

"Y-yeah... The interest will be really bad if I borrow from moneylenders again. So please?"

I was unable to refuse him in the end. I wasn't against the idea of lending him money. I wouldn't have minded doing so if he was going to use it to get through this difficult time and turn the bar's situation around.

I saw no sign he was going to put in the effort, though. He blamed customers for not coming, he chewed out his part-time workers, and he cursed the world for his troubles. Just being around him made me feel depressed. Eventually I started just giving him money and rushing to work without a word. I felt most relaxed when I was napping on the sofa at the office during my breaks between training and other odd jobs.

My time was filled with concerts, introducing restaurants and magic item shops, and being interviewed by newspaper reporters. My fans gradually increased, my songs spread, and I became famous. For some reason, Donny's behavior only grew worse as I achieved greater success. We were like light and shadow. As I devoted myself more and more to my idol work, my personal life had me exhausted. It was hard being with Donny.

It was around that time I witnessed something terrible. It happened when I was trying out a bunch of different cafés, desperate for some alone time. Donny had never taken me to a café before, but I had been to a few with producers and other idols from my agency, and I started going by myself as well.

There was an especially nice one called Fromage. It wasn't a high-class restaurant, but it wasn't noisy like a bar, either. I thought of it as a pleasant place where people like me who were becoming famous could relax. Until I heard the conversation at the table behind me anyway.

A young man was being threatened by a beautiful girl and two imposing men. It seemed like the girl was deceiving the young man into supporting her financially, and she dumped him after learning that he'd quit his job...or something like that. I just went to the café to enjoy some delicious cake, but every piece of their conversation I heard made the cake taste bitter.

"You were super good at finding bargains on accessories from street vendors and peddlers, Nick. This talisman has been very useful. I'm grateful for that, truly... But I'm done with you."

They weren't speaking loudly enough for me to hear every word from my table, but I could tell the girl was taking pleasure in her wrongdoing.

"Urgh..."

I almost spat out a mouthful of cake. This kind of situation was far from rare. I saw it all the time at restaurants I used to work at, and I

had even gone through a similar experience. Someone might lend money only to never be paid back, or have their purse stolen when they weren't paying attention. I wasn't raised in the best area, so you would think I was used to seeing these kinds of petty crimes. Despite that, I couldn't help from getting nauseous.

What scared me was the thought that I might have been headed for the same fate as this young man. Donny was different, wasn't he? I wanted to ask but was scared to. The young man left, and before I knew it, I was walking through the city looking for him.

He was in a bad state when I found him. He was dripping wet in the rain, looking like a stray dog on the verge of death. I pretended our meeting was a coincidence, and I talked to him.

"Leave me alone."

He rejected me coldly. I supposed that was a natural reaction. I probably would have run for my life if someone had addressed me with no warning like that. But I didn't give up. I kept talking to him and ended up giving him a concert ticket that was meant for family and friends. I had an extra that Donny had refused.

I was happy when I saw him at the concert. That was just according to plan. He was dressed like a novice adventurer, so I immediately recognized him from onstage. The enthusiasm of the idol fans drew him in, and he enjoyed the concert to the fullest.

It wasn't long before I started to feel guilty that I might have pulled him in too deep. He bought a coat and a magic glow stick set, came to every concert, and even frequented fan club events. Just when I started to worry about how much money he was spending immediately after being swindled by his ex-girlfriend, he disappeared.

I was worried that something terrible might have happened to him, but I had no choice except to press on with my work. I was overjoyed when I next saw him on my day off. He had cleaned up so that he no longer looked like a stray dog—he must have been working hard. It was even better when I talked to him as he was stressing out over a trivial matter involving one of his party members. It was an endearing problem to have when compared to what he had been through.

I gave him what advice I could, then told him to take care of himself and keep working hard. He said that he would. I was glad that I had become an idol.

One month passed. My relationship with Donny was collapsing after I discovered that he was wasting the money I was lending him on gambling instead of using it as working capital for the bar. I happened upon him with a shady-looking man when passing through the area. He was closing for the day and leaving for a gambling parlor even

though the busiest time of day for a bar was just getting started.

We got into an argument. I told him I couldn't lend him money anymore, and he lost his temper like never before. He told me that it was my fault he was in this predicament and that it was my responsibility to help him. I watched in horror as Donny was obviously taking what the shady tigerian said at face value.

After realizing he was now incapable of hearing anything other than flattery, there was nothing for me to do but leave the bar.

The next day, I had my third meeting with the young man. This time, I ended up turning to him for advice. That said, I couldn't tell a fan that "I'm stressed out because my boyfriend is a freeloader and gambler," so I gave a vague explanation. I told him clumsily that a friend of mine had lost their confidence and was in a dark place.

The young man looked at me like I was stupid and said, "Aren't you forgetting something?" I started to get mad, but his next words caught me off guard.

"You said it yourself, remember? It's an idol's job to make people happy and give them courage."

He was right. That was why I was working as an idol. People could change, just like the young man before me. If he could turn his life around, maybe Donny could, too. I at least wanted him to come to one of my concerts; I thought it might make him feel something. I believed that idols had the power to make people happy. I wanted to test that one last time.

"Urgh, what a goddamn pain..."

It wasn't easy, but I got Donny to begrudgingly promise to come to one of my concerts. He had one condition: I had to accompany him to a casino. I reluctantly accepted, and we made our way to one through a light rain.

"I know you think I'm a slob. I admit I've let you down many times. I'm sorry for that. But I'm not going to the casino without a plan," he said.

"...What's your plan?" I asked.

"You remember the tigerian you saw at the bar the other day?"

"Yeah."

"He was arrested for match-fixing, fraud, and a bunch of other stuff. He was a crook."

"...I don't understand."

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"If he was arrested, you should lay off the gambling... Weren't you a regular at his gambling parlor?"

"No, you don't get it. He tricked me. I'm a victim of his."

“Then why—”

“He had to fix my matches because he knew how good I was at gambling. I’ll be able to win at a legitimate casino like this. Don’t you see?”

It went even worse than I could have imagined. I wished I hadn’t come. Anyone could see that Donny was an easy mark. He did occasionally get lucky and win at cards, but only when the dealer allowed it to rope him further in. I was sure he had fallen for this trick many times already, but he was totally oblivious.

The dealer and the other guest at the table praised Donny profusely. They complimented him on his “manly wagers” and said he was the “type of player who shows his true skill when the game is on the line.” It was obvious flattery, but he fell for all of it. They even said things to me that set my teeth on edge. They realized I was his source of money. I tried hard not to glare at them.

I was fond of Donny’s dream. I don’t mean to speak ill of those who fight to make a living at casinos, but I thought Donny looked so absurd, I wanted to cry as I saw him throw away his dream in favor of delusions of fleeting success. I watched the cards dance across the table, wondering where things went wrong.

Eventually a woman joined the table and upended the entire situation. I’ve never played cards before, so I didn’t know how exactly she did it, but she dominated the table. She was taking all the coins for herself before anyone even understood what was happening. By the time the game was over, the dealer, the other guest, and Donny were all despondent. Donny likely realized he was nothing more than prey for truly skilled gamblers like her. He slumped his shoulders dejectedly.

“A true gambler plays with their own money. If you can’t do that, you’re little better than an overgrown child,” she said to Donny, driving the final nail into the coffin. Her words may have been meant for me as well.

She flipped her long blond hair and walked gallantly away, and I chased after her without thinking. I pressed her for her name and introduced myself. For some reason, I told her all about Donny and our relationship. I didn’t tell her about my work as an idol, but I shared much more of my embarrassing situation than I needed to.

The woman, whose name was Tiana, gave a cold reply. “What if you just dump him?” she said. “Actually, you probably wanted to hear me say that.” Her reaction made sense, though. As we talked, I began to question why I was dating Donny in the first place. I felt like I had obtained something to help myself live another day.

My memory of everything afterward on that night was hazy. I hadn’t forgotten what happened, but it was all so absurd that I wasn’t

confident any of it was real. The only thing I remembered clearly was a beautiful knight protecting me from a tiger monster.

“We have paid the entire debt you owed to the casino. We will also shoulder all loans you accepted on verbal promises. You no longer have to worry about pursuit from debt collectors.”

Three people were sitting in a small room divided by a partition. One was a bald man in black clothes—Joseph, a producer at my talent agency. He was dispassionately rattling off a long and tedious contract to the man before him. I could hardly believe my ears—he was assuming the man’s entire sizable debt.

“However...”

Joseph paused and looked hard at the man sitting across from him. The man was Donny. He had a bandage on his arm from the night in the casino, but that wasn’t nearly as conspicuous as the loneliness and frustration visible on his face.

“Your relationship with our idol ends right now. You must never speak to her again, and if you happen upon her by chance, you must stay away. You must also keep quiet on every detail you know about her, no matter how trivial. If we discover that you let something slip...”

Donny trembled in fear.

“We will ask you to repay the debt we assumed. We will entrust that to a professional collector, of course. If anything you do has a negative impact on her idol activities, we will bill you for any loss of profit. Are you aware of what that would mean for your life?” Joseph asked.

“A-all right, I get it...,” Donny said without meeting Joseph’s eyes. He turned in his chair uncomfortably and looked at the third person in the room—me—pleadingly. “I-I’m sorry, Belle. I never meant wrong. So—”

“Enough, Donny.” I shook my head. “I’m Agate. I’m not your Belle, and I never will be. Forget about the past.”

Donny hung his head. I felt a bit of sympathy well up inside me. I liked this man. From the bottom of my heart, I wanted to support him. It was hard to watch him fall so low.

The day that strange monster attacked the casino, Donny abandoned me and ran. It was over for us at that moment. I decided to break up with him, then told Joseph everything and asked for his help. He did not take the news well. He was furious, in fact. He told me I was a danger to myself, that I needed to act like an idol, and that I needed to “break up with him right this instant.” It pained me, but I had no choice but to do as he said.

I also told him about the mysterious knight who had saved me at

the casino. They were like a hero out of legend. I was relieved he seemed to react well to that part of the story. In any case, I had no choice but to move forward. That was why I called Donny here today. It was time to end our relationship once and for all.

“Donny...I wanted to support you forever. But I can’t. Do your best without me. I won’t ask you to help me anymore,” I declared, looking Donny straight in the eyes.

He opened his mouth to speak but closed it and hung his head in silence. He then signed the document that Joseph gave him. It was a contract laying out the talent agency’s proposal. The agency was going to release him from his gambling debts in return for his silence on my identity as the idol Agate. From this day on, Donny and I were going to walk completely separate paths.

“...I’m sorry,” Donny muttered so quietly, I could barely hear it as he exited the room.

I sighed with relief when Donny left the office. I was finally done with all the problems I had been ignoring for so long. But this wasn’t an ending; if anything, it was a new beginning.

“I am so sorry for the trouble,” I said.

“Don’t worry about it. Just pay me back with hard work,” Joseph responded indifferently. He was probably still angry, but he wasn’t the type of person to lose his temper at someone. He helped me out of my situation with Donny so that I—or rather, the idol Agate—could continue to work. That meant there was one thing I needed to do.

“About your next job—,” he began, but I interrupted him.

“I want to write a new song, Mr. Coleman,” I said.

“Oh?”

“I want to write the lyrics, too.”

I had been proactive with my training and idol activities, but when it came to more fundamental parts of the job like planning and deciding what songs I would sing, I had only ever done what my producers told me. I could make the excuse that I was too occupied overcoming more immediate hurdles, but I hadn’t given any thought to what kind of idol I wanted to be.

Until now.

“Do you know what you want to sing about?” Joseph asked.

Idol songs all had a theme. Minstrels, from which idols descended, did more than just sing. Their original purpose was to tour the lands and convey the beauty of nature and the preciousness of love they observed on their travels. They entertained people with the imagery their songs inspired, transporting them to places they would never see and telling them of people they would never meet. Minstrels didn’t just rely on their beautiful voices—it was an important mission of

theirs to use their skills to inform people of the beauty of the world.

But minstrels had another theme that was just as important for them to handle.

“Yes, I do,” I answered resolutely.

After that, I temporarily suspended my normal idol activities and withdrew from the concerts I was scheduled to participate in. I spent an entire month writing a new song and training to perform it. My anguish-filled days as a writer and my path toward becoming a true idol were just beginning.

The Idol Stan Who Dreams of Being an S-Rank Adventurer



After a long break, Agate was finally about to take the stage once again.

Many rumors circulated among Agate's fans during her mysterious hiatus, some of it being terrible gossip. Only a small number of fans ceased to support her, however. This went without saying, but Nick was one of the fans who believed in her and waited. When a concert schedule posted on a park bulletin board included a solo Agate concert, her fans lost their minds with excitement. The rumor that she had retired was unfounded. Nick was as ecstatic as anyone and decided to get in line at the ticket booth early—so early that he camped out overnight.

He was one of dozens of adult men lining up at the ticket booth, which was so unusual that a stray dog that had wandered into the park turned tail and fled at the sight of them. Karan happened upon Nick on her way to breakfast when the sun rose that morning. She was taken aback when he told her he had been there all night, and she bought him a coffee with a warning that he would catch a cold. Nick accepted it gratefully but felt embarrassed when the other fans looked at him with sharp, accusing glares. They assumed Karan was his girlfriend.

Fortunately, he wouldn't have to put up with that much longer. It was almost time for the ticket booth to open.

"Hey, Nick," the man sitting next to him said.

"What's up, Willy?" Nick responded.

Willy was an adventurer who frequented the Fishermen Adventurers Guild. Nick approached the man after seeing him at both

concerts and the guild, and they became concert buddies.

“...There’s a rumor going around about a guy who makes his girlfriend wait in line for him to buy tickets, and another about a freeloader who wants his girlfriend to work as an idol so he can live off her earnings. So don’t take their glares personally,” Willy said.

“Sounds like you’re trying to enter me into a competition for worst boyfriend of the year among idol fans. You know full well she’s not my girlfriend,” Nick snapped.

“Sorry, I’m joking. Anyway, have you heard? People are saying the legendary paladin who protects Labyrinth City has reappeared.”

Nick shook his head, having no clue what he was talking about. “Who’s that?”

“There was once a time when Labyrinth City was even more dangerous than it is now. Theft was so common that people couldn’t walk the streets without constantly watching their own back.”

“Hmm.”

“Legend has it that there was an S-rank adventurer who made it her mission to eliminate the wanted thieves who threatened the citizens’ safety. She was said to be beautiful, but because she always left without giving her name after saving the day, people could only call her the ‘Lovely Paladin.’”

“Huh.”

“Something wrong, Nick? You don’t seem interested.”

“No, it’s just...I don’t know where you’re going with this. It’s hard for me to focus on anything other than Aggie’s concert right now.”

“Trust me, it’s related.” Willy smiled and continued, “You know the casino that was attacked? People are saying the Lovely Paladin appeared and saved Agate.”

“Cough, cough.”

Nick began to choke.

“Huh? You okay, Nick?”

“Y-yep! I-I’m fine!”

“If you say so...”

Nick had been too preoccupied during the fight with Leon to register what was happening around them. It was only once they’d defeated Leon that he realized the girl Tiana was protecting looked like Agate. He had encountered Agate three times off stage. He thought it might be her, but he didn’t have time to confirm.

Nick asked Tiana about the girl later, but apparently her name was Belle. He figured he must have been mistaken; there was no way Agate would go to a casino anyway. It turned out his bad feeling was right, though. He did his best to keep a neutral expression as Willy continued talking.

“...A-anyway, that’s an old legend, isn’t it? Do you really think it

was the same person?" Nick asked.

Willy grinned. "No idea. She could've been a legendary race with a long lifespan, like a high elf or a dark elf."

"Seems unlikely."

"I agree, admittedly. Some people are saying she's been reborn, but I don't believe that, either. One thing's for certain, though—she did leave the scene without giving her name or accepting a reward from the casino or the Sun Knights. Her fame is growing rapidly."

"W-wow..."

"The paladin also looked androgynous. Agate thinks they were a woman, though."

"Huh? Did Aggie say that?"

"It's a rumor. She was apparently stunningly beautiful, too. But who knows if that's true," Willy said.

Nick was about to ask for more details when the ticket booth opened, and their efforts paid off in the form of front-row seats.

Nick looked at the ticket and breathed a sigh of relief. He thought Agate might have been injured at the casino or that the shock of witnessing such a fierce battle up close had caused her to shut herself away. Essentially, he was terrified that he had ended Agate's idol career. Her name and the concert date on the ticket put that fear to rest. He was sure she would show herself to be safe and sound. With that expectation in mind, Nick headed to the concert.

His apprehension turned out to be totally ungrounded. Not only that—the total opposite turned out to be true.

"Good evening! Thank you for coming today!"

""""Good evening!!!"""

Agate's fans responded to her greeting with hoarse screams. Nick was one of the many cheering her on. Despite the size of the crowd, he felt a strange sense of pride that he was at the center of it—that he had been more worried about her than anyone else. This kind of viewpoint was common among dedicated fans.

"I had to deal with a few things in my private life. The rumor that I was injured and retired is completely untrue. As you can see, I'm fit as a fiddle!"

"Yeeaaahhh!"

"I was so worried!"

"I'll always support you!"

Agate waved in response to her fans' cheers. She'd looked depressed when Nick saw her at the casino, but there was no hint of that now. She was brimming with energy.

"Thank you! It's true that I was involved in a dangerous incident, though... I could've easily died."

The venue grew noisy. Everyone sounded worried about Agate.

“But a woman saved me. It is thanks to her that I am alive and well.” Her voice was quiet and mellow, projecting a charm different from her usual stoic attitude. “She was a virtuous person, just like a paladin of legend. She inspired me to want to save people and give them courage... So I am going to honor her heroics not as an idol, but as a minstrel. This is a brand-new song!”

The audience went wild at her sudden announcement of a new song. Nick glanced at Willy before cheering. He was smiling suggestively. He must have caught wind about the new song somewhere. Nick was jealous and surprised, but what Agate said next astonished him even more.

“I want to show my thanks through this song! It’s called ‘The Lovely Paladin!’”

Agate had suspended her idol activities with no warning and withdrawn from the concerts she was scheduled to participate in. The decision of her talent agency not to publicly announce the reason for the hiatus invited doubt. Some wondered if she had been badly injured in the casino incident. They also questioned what she’d been doing in a casino in the first place.

Agate put all rumors to rest by explaining at her concert that she had taken the break to write a new song. She’d devoted herself to its composition and trained for the performance, knowing her disappearance would spark rumors. She’d ignored all the noise and had written something truly incredible.

The quality of the song had caused quite a controversy within the talent agency during the process leading up to her performance. The disagreements concerned its theme and direction. Singing songs with this type of theme was important for minstrels—you could even call it a mission of theirs. It was risky for an idol, however. The song was a hero’s tale.

A glorification of one person was near to a taboo for idols. They were supposed to convey their love to all; singing of heroes may have been expected of a minstrel, but it wasn’t a good look for an idol.

Some in the agency argued she should abandon the project. Others wanted her to go forward with it. Arguments on both sides were presented in countless meetings. In the end, the company president stepped in and made a decision.

“Eh, the song is about a woman. I think it’ll be fine.”

A rumor was circulating through Labyrinth City of a “Lovely Paladin” who protected the city from the shadows. She was said to be a beautiful woman, and some even said she saved Agate’s life. This rumor worked in Agate’s favor and her talent agency’s. If the person

who saved Agate had been a man, or even a woman whose identity was known, a significant number of fans would have left her upon hearing the song. Deciding that a story about a woman shrouded in mystery would be received positively, the president gave Agate his full support.

Careful consideration was given to the lyrics. The first half of the song praised the beauty and strength of the paladin, while the second half inspired the listener by likening all courageous people who carried out justice to paladins. The latter part especially resonated with male adventurers. It inspired them to be the kind of person Agate respected.

“Hey, this song is really good.”

“I’m getting fired up.”

“It’s so beautiful.”

“I wish they would auction off Agate’s original draft. I’d pay any amount of money.”

“All right, I’m gonna go catch some bad guys.”

These were some of the thoughts that the song inspired in the adventurers among her fans. The song’s live debut was a massive success, and her fans went home with the greatest sense of satisfaction yet.

All except for Nick.

“Why...? Why...?”

Nick was wallowing in sorrow on a bench by a street corner. He was happy about Agate’s return and her new song. He couldn’t have imagined the subject of the song, though. She had written a hero’s tale about him...or rather, Tiana. The mage had done nearly everything to save Agate at the casino, and Nick thought Tiana had been mostly in control during their fight with Leon as well.

It was difficult to tell whose thoughts were whose while combined with someone else using Union; that was true when he was combined with Karan, at least. When he combined with Tiana, however, her will was stronger than his. He ended up simply aiding the actions she decided to take. Nick was mostly in charge of moving the body, but he felt like Tiana took charge of speaking, spell casting, and strategy.

That said, he had no more than vague memories of Tiana’s thoughts from their Union. Bond told him, “Your partner’s thoughts fade quickly due to a safety feature. Remembering everything from their mind would place too large a burden on your brain.”

This all resulted in mixed feelings for Nick. He should have been happy about the song, but he felt as if the credit for saving Agate had been stolen from him, or as if he had stolen it from Tiana.

“How should I behave at her concerts...? I guess I could just not

worry about it,” Nick muttered to himself.

“That’s right. There’s no need to worry about it.”

“I suppose... Huh?”

Nick heard a familiar voice and agreed without thinking. He sighed and turned around to see Agate wearing casual clothes.

“Hello, stray dog. This is the fourth time we’ve run into each other, huh?” she said.

“...Stop calling me that,” Nick retorted.

“What else can I call you? I don’t know your name. Oh, you don’t have to tell me. You can call me whatever you want, too.”

“I already know your name, though...”

“I’d rather you not use it. I could get in trouble if anyone overhears you.”

“I get that, but why’d you speak to me in the first place?”

As an idol, Agate had to be careful to avoid making people think she was getting too friendly with any individual fan. Doing so could harm her popularity.

“I can’t help it. I thought we might be getting too close, but I don’t know where else to look for a lead.”

“A lead? What do you mean?”

“Who was that person who appeared out of nowhere at the casino? And what happened to you and Tiana?”

“Grk.” Nick flinched back from Agate’s accusing gaze.

“How did you two do that? That tiger didn’t really seem like a monster, either. I can’t make any sense of it, but I’m sure you could tell me something.”

Nick’s greatest fear was close to being realized. They would be in big trouble if it was discovered that they were hiding the Sword of Bonds and using it for their own benefit. He needed to throw her off the scent.

“I—I don’t know anything. Isn’t this conversation backward? You sound like the idol fan right now with all these questions,” Nick said, desperate to change the topic.

Agate giggled. “All right, all right. We both have our secrets we don’t need to share. We’re just having a casual conversation. That’s fine with me.”

“...You don’t have a sense of danger. What if I turned out to be a bad person?”

“My producer often gets mad at me for being a danger to myself.”

That’s not surprising, Nick thought exasperatedly. He figured she must give her coworkers and bosses at the talent agency a hard time.

Agate giggled again at the sight of Nick’s strained smile. “...It’s kinda neat being called an idol fan, though. I’ll take it. I am a massive fan of the paladin, after all.”

“R-really?”

“Oh, can you at least tell me if Tiana is safe?”

“Yeah, she’s fine. She’s had enough of casinos, so she’s focusing on dragon racing.”

“Do you really think she’s done with casinos?” Agate responded in disbelief.

Nick shrugged. “I’m skeptical, too,” he said.

“Well, I’m glad to hear she’s okay. Can you give this to her?” Agate pulled an item out of her bag.

“It’s an igniter. Looks expensive, too,” Nick said.

“Hers broke at the casino. I want to give this to her as thanks.”

“Oh yeah, I haven’t seen her use it recently. I’ll pass it along.”

“Thank you. Oh, don’t read the thank-you letter I put in the box.”

“I don’t make a habit of reading other people’s letters.”

“Good.”

“Is that all you needed?”

“Yes.”

“Well, good luck. I’m sure you’re busy with songwriting and a dozen other things,” Nick said, tamping down his desire to press her for details on whatever she was working on.

Agate smiled as if she realized what he was thinking. “Thank you very much. And good luck to you, too,” she said.

“Good luck with what?” Nick asked.

“That’s for you to figure out. I sing songs of encouragement, but that doesn’t mean I know the dreams and goals of all my fans,” Agate said as if he had asked a stupid question.

“I can’t really think of anything off the top of my head... Oh.” Nick was unsure of what to say, but then he remembered something. Tiana had asked him about his dreams when she accompanied him to Shadow Wolf Cave. “...I want to be an S-rank adventurer.”

“Wow, that’s a really big goal!”

“Wh-what’s wrong with that? S-rank adventurers are heroes who protect cities and save people from danger... It’s a dream of mine.”

“A dream, huh,” Agate repeated with a smirk.

“Hey, what kinda reaction is that? You’re the one who asked,” he said indignantly.

“Oh, I’m not making fun of you. It’s just...”

“What?”

“You’ve already saved the city. As the paladin.”

“Oh yeah... Wait, no, that wasn’t me. I’d like to say that was me, but it wasn’t!”

Agate ignored Nick’s fervent denial and started to walk away. She then turned around. “Don’t worry, I won’t tell anyone. I haven’t yet, have I?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

Not one person had suspected the Survivors since Agate started singing about the paladin. That was more than enough proof that she wouldn't give them away.

“Although the rumor has grown to such crazy proportions that I doubt anyone would believe an unknown adventurer like you even if you came forward,” Agate said.

“Hmph...,” Nick grunted.

“What was that? Do you want to boast about what you did?” She smiled teasingly. “Well, it seems like you have something you need to keep a secret. I won't pry. But...” Agate paused and looked Nick in the eyes. “Even if we're the only ones who know the truth of who saved me and what you and Tiana did, I wanted something to remain. That's why I chose to sing this song.”

Nick was shocked speechless. Hearing her say outright that she was singing for him nearly broke his brain.

“Anyway, I need to go. It's almost time for my lesson. Take care of yourself.”

“...I-I'm telling you, that wasn't me!”

“Good luck with becoming a hero or an S-rank adventurer, or whatever it is you want to be!” Agate waved and walked away. She seemed well aware that Nick wouldn't chase after her.

“Geez...,” Nick muttered.

Becoming an S-rank adventurer wasn't originally a goal Nick meant for himself; it was something he wanted for the leader of his old party. He'd said it with very little thought when Tiana asked him, but it felt surprisingly right. At the very least, claiming the goal for himself made more sense as a member of a party that collectively decided not to easily trust other people. Better to aim for it himself than to expect it of other people.

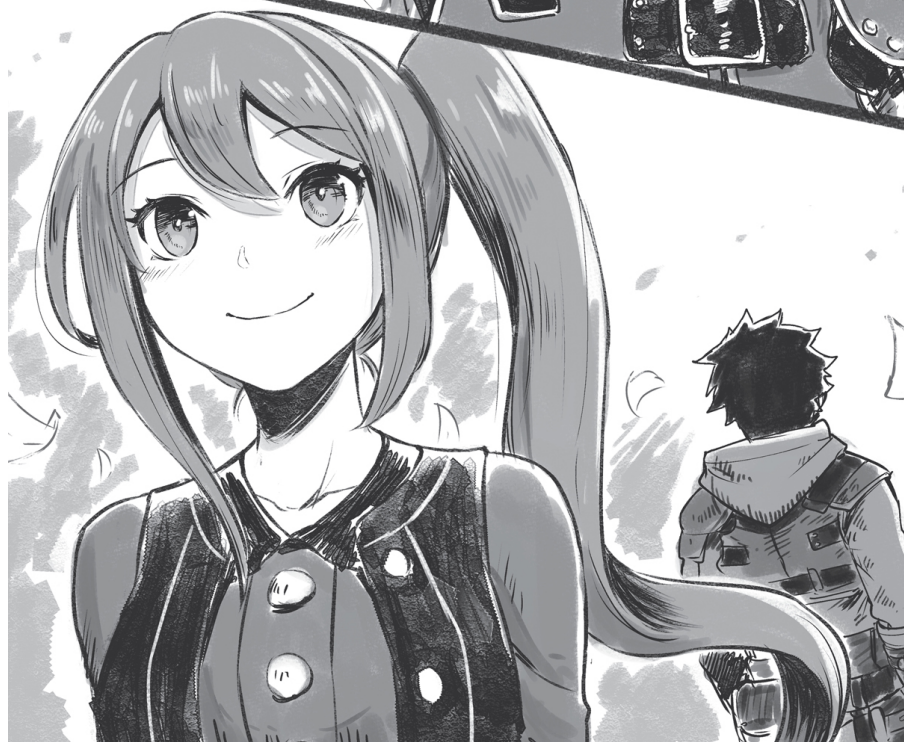
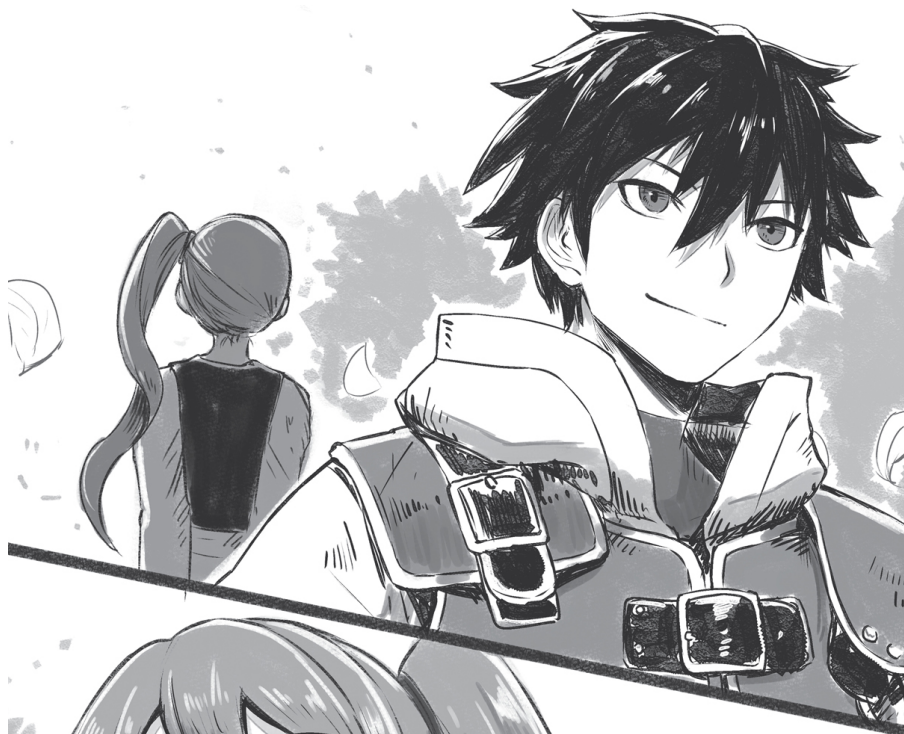
“Guess I'm the topic of an idol's song now.”

Nick got up and walked in the opposite direction from Agate.

“What took you so long?” Tiana asked Nick irritably. She was flicking the beads of her magic abacus at their table in the Fishermen Adventurers Guild. The other Survivors were all already there, each killing time in their own way.

“I got caught up talking to someone. This is for you, Tiana.” Nick handed her the item he had received earlier.

“What's this?”



"It's a present from a fan of yours."

"Huh...?" Suspicious, Tiana opened the package to reveal a shiny silver cylinder. Its matte finish gave it a mature feel, and a red magic stone in the center shone like a ruby. "It's an igniter... Was this expensive?"

"Oh, I didn't buy it," Nick responded.

"There's a letter... Oh, it's from that girl." Tiana wasted no time pulling out her pipe and stuffing it with tobacco. She lit it with practiced hands and took a puff, pleasure obvious on her face. "... Haah, it's been so long since my last smoke."

"Tiana, your smoke," Karan complained, coughing.

"Oh, sorry. I'll save it for later." Tiana hurriedly extinguished the pipe. She'd got so excited, she'd forgotten about her custom of not smoking around her party members.

Nick shrugged. "You look happy."

"It's nice regaining something you lost in a new form," she responded.

"Oh yeah, your last igniter broke during the confusion in the casino, right?" Nick asked.

"I'm not talking about the igniter. I'm talking about life," Tiana said boastfully. She carefully put the igniter away.

"I was gonna tell you to take care of it, but that doesn't seem necessary," Nick said.

"Of course I'm going to."

Satisfied by Tiana's reaction, Nick changed the subject. "So let's head to a labyrinth—"

"Before we leave, I have something I'd like to show you all," Bond interrupted.

"What is it?"

"Just read this." Bond put a magazine on the table.

"What's this?" Karan asked.

"What an odd cover," Zem commented dubiously.

The magazine's eye-grabbing cover depicted a monster with a sheep's face performing an eerie ceremony as men and women watched in fear. The top of the page read *Lemuria Monthly May Edition* in a hair-raising font.

"It is an occult magazine," Bond explained.

"A-cult magazine?" Karan parroted. The word was apparently unfamiliar to her. She flipped through the pages with great interest.

"Oh, do not read it yet. Begin with this page," Bond instructed.

"Let's see... A special feature on the Lovely Paladin?!" Nick exclaimed with shock.

The article featured a black-and-white illustration of a beautiful

woman in magnificent armor. She was lifting her sword into the air and being admired by a crowd of people. It was supposed to resemble a dignified religious painting, but it came off as calculated and superficial. That wasn't all—there were also several dubious claims in the article, including “An eyewitness said the hero descended from the sky and exacted divine punishment on the rampaging monster,” “Some believe the paladin is an adventurer of the secret SSS rank,” and “This incident may be just a prelude to the final battle between the angels and the demons.”

“What the hell is this?” Nick asked.

Bond grinned and shrugged. “It is a special feature on the Lovely Paladin, as you can see. To think Labyrinth City had the protection of such a dazzling hero! I wish I could see her myself!” he said, clearly enjoying himself.

“We’re going to be in big trouble if we get found out, you know,” Tiana muttered, putting a hand to her head as if she had a headache.

Nick surprised everyone by laughing. “Ha-ha, this is great! Anytime there’s trouble in Labyrinth City, we can just leave it to the paladin!”

Zem looked at Nick in amazement. “You are in an unusually cheery mood. Was that problem of yours resolved?”

“Yeah, you could say that,” Nick responded.

“This isn’t fair. I want to see the paladin, too,” Karan complained.

“I’m sure you’ll see them eventually,” Nick said.

Karan smiled in response. Bond said nothing and crossed his arms in satisfaction. Tiana was the only one who looked displeased.

“Nick, you’re in way too good a mood over some words of encouragement from your favorite idol. As far as anyone knows, we didn’t do anything. It was all the paladin. The guild is not going to give us a reward or a promotion in rank,” she said.

“Who cares? I want to raise our rank, too, but we’ll just have to do it the hard way. We know what we did, no matter what anyone else thinks of us,” Nick responded, trying to hide his embarrassment at repeating Agate’s message.

Tiana’s face went blank. “We know what we’ve done...”

“Y-yeah,” Nick said, slightly thrown off by her shift in attitude.

“And it’s up to oneself to decide if they’re a mage.”

“Huh? That sounds good to me...”

“...” Tiana fell silent, making Nick wonder if he had stepped on a land mine. After a lengthy pause, she smiled. “You say insightful things every now and then.”

“What do you mean, ‘every now and then’?”

“You should be happy to receive praise from a genius mage like me.”

“All right, all right.”

They all shrugged and smiled in response to Tiana’s boast.

“Anyway, there’s no use dwelling on this. Back to work. Labyrinths don’t explore themselves,” Nick said, clapping his hands to hurry the others along.

The Survivors took their first step toward yet another adventure.

Extra Chapter—Karan’s Labyrinth City Stroll



Karan had a craving for something sweet. She didn’t have a particular reason.

Actually, she did. Like a spoiled child, she felt a strong pang of jealousy when she heard Bond talking about the ice cream he ate at the casino. Just imagining the elegant sound of the piano, the red carpet leading to the bar counter, and the beautiful ice cream served by the skilled pastry chef was enough to fill her mouth with a taste of sweetness.

“Calm down, Karan... I shouldn’t get this excited over ice cream,” Karan muttered to herself.

“What was that, Karan?” Tiana asked.

“Nothing.”

Tiana and Karan were riding a stagecoach that traveled in a loop around Labyrinth City. The casino was closed temporarily because of the damage Leon had caused, and there were no other stores within walking distance that served ice cream—at least, none that were good enough to justify their prices. That was why the two of them had decided to go to the north side of the city. Karan was originally going to go by herself, but because the north side was far and inconvenient to reach on foot, Tiana had volunteered to guide her.

“We’re getting off at the next stop. The fare is two hundred dina,” Tiana said.

“Okay,” Karan responded.

The Survivors—and most adventurers, for that matter—chose to live on the south side, where rent and inn charges were reasonable. There were few adventurers on the north side. The primary reason for

this was the dragon stables outside the city wall. Dragons grazed the fields, keeping away monsters and eating those that tried to get through. The resulting safety attracted a richer and more intellectual populace. Most of the restaurants Karan visited were on the south side, and she had never been to the wealthy areas of the north side.

"I always look for a place with mages when I'm in the mood for something sweet," Tiana said boastfully.

"Why?" Karan asked.

"Making sweets is a more exacting process than preparing other types of food. You need a scale for accurate measurements, and ice and fire magic for perfect precision. You'd be surprised how many students of magic end up as pastry chefs."

"Huh..."

"I know a place with better sweets than anywhere near Blacksmith Street or the guild. Don't worry, it's not too expensive."

Karan didn't particularly trust Tiana's idea of "not too expensive," but she couldn't resist the temptation of sweets. She was determined to be brave. Just then, the coachman called out the name of the station in a slow voice.

"The next stop is Sabbath Hill."

Despite its dangerous-sounding name, Sabbath Hill was a trendy district with lots of young people. It was a students' quarter with schools for aristocratic children and vocational schools for people studying magic, and a shopping district for those wealthy student bodies. Novice mages in robes without a spot of dirt, monster blood, or chemicals walked the streets like they owned the place, chatting cheerfully with their friends. Karan was thankful for Tiana's presence; she might have been overwhelmed otherwise.

"Over here," Tiana said.

"Okay," Karan replied.

Tiana walked briskly through Sabbath Hill. The young people in the area timidly avoided her and Karan, both of whom must have appeared somewhat dangerous to them, and watched them with curious eyes. Karan felt out of place.

"They're so cool."

"Are they adventurers?"

There was no inkling of mockery in their gazes; instead, Karan and Tiana seemed to impress the passersby as they drew their eyes. Karan found it a little embarrassing.

"The casino being closed means we have no choice but to come all the way out here... Oh, do you mind if I do a little shopping first?" Tiana asked.

"Do you come here often?"

“When I have money.”

“Being a mage sounds expensive.”

“That’s because it is. You’ll go broke in no time if you get greedy.”

Tiana looked back at Karan with a strained smile. She was shorter than the students, but her refined behavior and grace were a sight to behold. The students walking in the opposite direction avoided her, recognizing she was no ordinary person. They were right to fear her—she couldn’t have rebuilt her life after getting banished from her noble family without a great amount of toughness. She could also mow down monsters with the best of them. Karan respected Tiana for different reasons than Nick and Zem did.

“I want to stop by this place,” Tiana said, pointing at a magic item retailer.

All the items in the shop were for general consumer use rather than for combat. Naturally, there were no artifacts like the Sword of Bonds or telepathy orbs, either. It was mostly household items such as candles that didn’t need wax and magic pots for boiling water.

“What are you buying?” Karan asked.

“A pot for storing bread and other meals. The inside of the pot is full of cold air, which preserves the food within,” Tiana answered.

“Wow...” Karan wanted one of those for herself. She enjoyed eating at restaurants and bars, but she was also fond of street food and take-home meals.

“I want to use it to store the food Zem and Nick make.”

“Oh...”

Nick and Zem did most of the cooking on their labyrinth expeditions. As a veteran adventurer, Nick was good at cooking outdoors. He made stew using dried meat, birds and rabbits they caught, and weeds, and knew how to make preserved foods such as dry biscuits taste good. His knowledge was always helpful. Zem was in charge of the party’s health thanks to his medical expertise. He had a lot of experience taking care of children in his sanctuary, so making meals for a large group was his specialty.

“Do you not cook for yourself?” Karan asked.

“No way. That would be way too much of a hassle.” Tiana shrugged. “I’d like to hire a housemaid for that kind of thing, but I haven’t saved up enough money. What about you, Karan?”

“I go to the morning market with Nick for breakfast... And I eat out for lunch and dinner, too.”

“You don’t like cooking, either. Oh, this one’s good.”

Tiana grabbed a pot. It was made of white porcelain and had a small magic stone—a core for activating magic items—embedded in the side. It had a modest design, but it wasn’t completely plain. There were petals carved into the pot around the conspicuous magic stone,

incorporating the part found on all magic items as part of its design. Karan wasn't good at evaluating such tools and furniture, but she was jealous of Tiana's ability to find items like this.

Just then, a large man tried to pass behind Tiana. The aisle was narrow, and his elbow collided with Tiana's back as he tried to force his way through.

"Ow! What the hell?!" Tiana snapped.

"Shut up, girl! You were in the way!" he yelled back.

Karan quickly steadied Tiana so she wouldn't drop the pot and glared at the man who'd bumped into her.

"You're the one who needs to be careful," she warned.

"Urk..." He gasped.

There were few who could withstand the intimidating glare of a dragonian. Karan was still young for a warrior, but her experience in labyrinths made up for that. The man broke out into a cold sweat and froze in place.

"...Haah. Whatever. Get lost," Karan ordered.

"O-okay." The man scurried away like a scared kitten.

An employee who'd heard the disturbance rushed over and bowed. "I am so sorry for the trouble."

"It's fine. It wasn't your fault. How much is this pot, by the way?" Tiana asked.

"Um, let's see..." Intimidated by Tiana's smile, the employee broke out into a cold sweat as he began to negotiate the price.

"Thanks for earlier, Karan," Tiana said.

Karan and Tiana settled down in a nearby ice cream shop once Tiana had finished her shopping. The ice cream was much richer than Karan was expecting. She received a white porcelain bowl with two flavors of ice cream topped with wafers. One flavor was pink raspberry, and the other was vanilla.

The item was disturbingly called "Rosy-Cheeked Raspberry & Bone-White Vanilla" on the menu. The description provided said it was inspired by the vanity of life and the idea that "even if you feel rosy-cheeked in the morning, the day will beat you down until there's nothing left but bone." The menu also stated that the pastry chef who'd founded this store wanted to convey a positive message: "You never know when you're going to die, so enjoy the taste of ice cream while you can."

Karan wasn't sure how to take that, but the ice cream was truly delicious. The raspberry flavor was sharp and sour, but it tasted surprisingly mellow when eaten with the vanilla ice cream and wafers. Apparently, the strong taste of the raspberry symbolized life, and the refreshing taste of the vanilla symbolized death. Karan didn't think

she would get along with this confectioner, but their skill made up for the odd themes.

Her thoughts were so occupied by the ice cream that it took her a while to realize Tiana was speaking to her.

“Whuh?” she said. Tiana giggled at her startled response.

“I’m talking about what happened in that store. People always underestimate me when I’m alone. I end up getting in a lot of fights because of that,” she continued.

“...How could anyone underestimate you?” Karan was confused. She couldn’t see how someone could be idiotic enough not to realize how incredible Tiana was.

“Mainly because I’m really short... Haah, Nick says he’s short and can’t build muscle, but he’s better off than me,” Tiana grumbled before shoving a spoonful of ice cream into her mouth. That behavior made her look like the young girl she was, compared to when she smoked or gambled.

“Oh, that’s all you meant?” Karan said.

“What do you mean, ‘that’s all?’”

Karan always felt a little inferior next to Tiana. She was lacking in so many ways compared to her. But Tiana wasn’t so different in some aspects. Tiana was clearly the smarter of the two, but she still worried about trivial things like her height and what she wanted to eat. That was a universal trait all people shared.

She was sure people who antagonized her had their own troubles and concerns as well. No one was invincible. Just like Tiana and the rest of their party. Or maybe it was just that people with that kind of weakness possessed surprising strength. Again, like Tiana and the others.

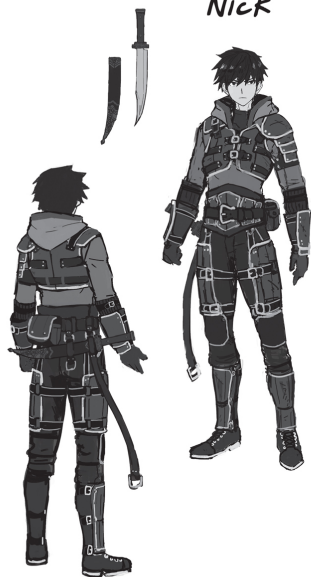
“You’re amazing, Tiana,” Karan said, and patted her head.

“Where is this coming from?!” Tiana asked.

“Don’t worry about it,” Karan responded.

Tiana was clearly flustered, but as they enjoyed their ice cream, Karan could also tell that she was happy.

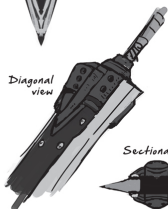
Nick



Karan



Diagonal view



Sectional view



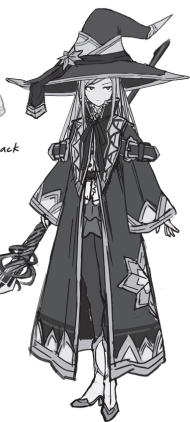
* Visible ears



Tiana



✧ Hair extends down to back



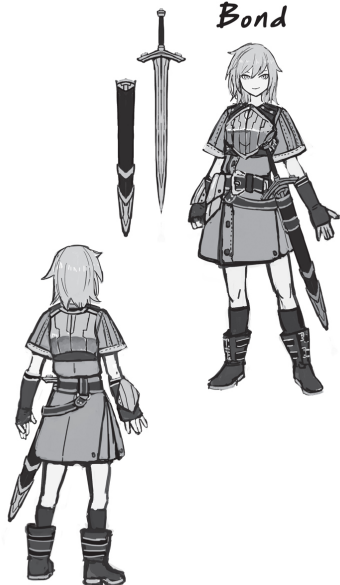
Smile



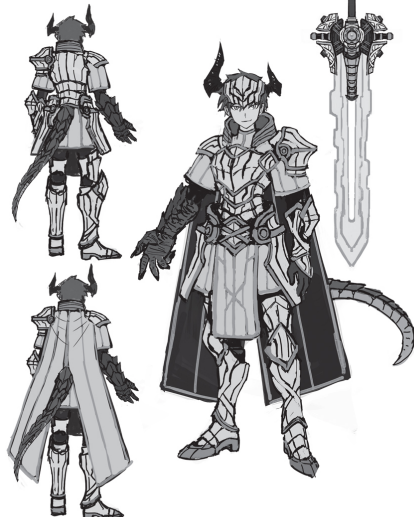
Zem



Bond

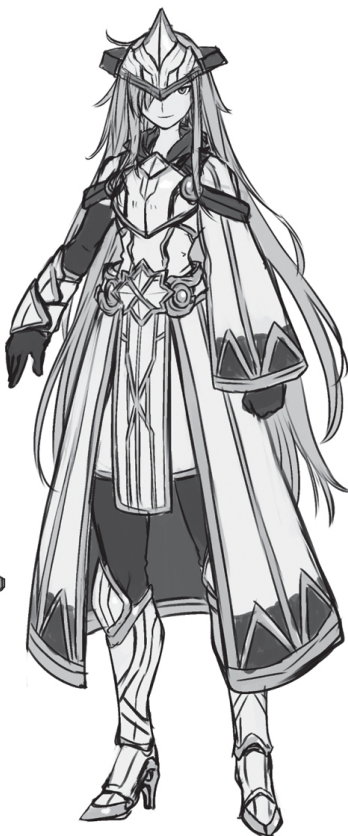


*Nick/
Karan*



Sword of Bonds

Nick/
Tiana





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